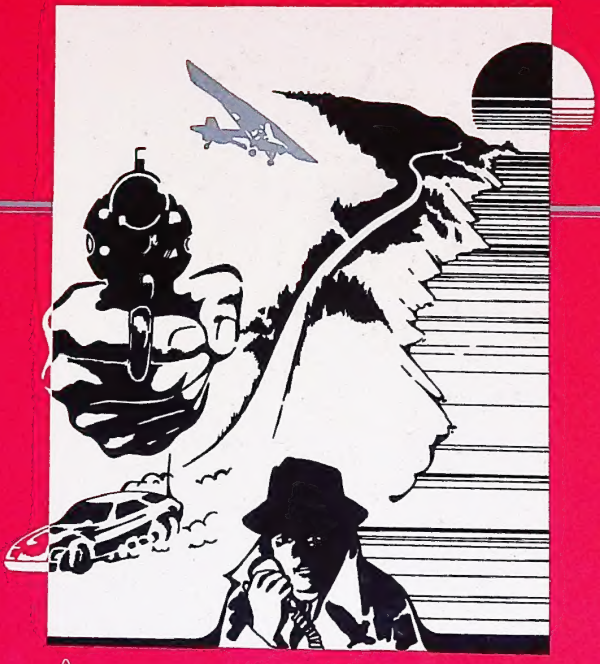
SOS AT MIDNIGHT



WALKER A. TOMPKINS

SOS at Midnight

Other Tommy Rockford adventures:

CQ ghost ship
DX brings danger
Death Valley QTH

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SOS at Midnight

By Walker A. Tompkins

American Radio Relay League
Newington, CT USA 06111

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For My Jr. Op.
PAMMY
who beat the odds

CHAPTER ONE

Tommy Rockford grinned with weary satisfaction as he put away his voltmeter, soldering gun and long-nose pliers in the workbench drawer. In his spare time after school he had restored this old tube-type 100-watt ham transmitter, wiring and testing it for the Radio Club. And today, in its first on-the-air contact coast to coast, the rig had checked out 100 per cent free of "bugs."

He was noting that happy fact in the station logbook when Spud Kleveland poked his head through the doorway and said timidly, "The red light went off, Tommy, so I figured it was okay to tell you I got your ham radio poster ready."

Tommy removed the headphones from his ears and switched off the receiver. Joining Spud out in the hall—no one but licensed operators were allowed inside the door marked *W6LUC Radio Shack*—Tommy said, "You work fast, Spud. Let's have a look at it."

Brimming with pleasure at this praise from his campus hero, Spud held up the poster he had made in art class:

"FIGHTING CRIME WAVES WITH RADIO WAVES"
A Lecture on Modern Law Enforcement
by our own Sheriff Ross Jackson
December 27 8 PM, City Recreation Center
sponsored by
SANTA BONITA HIGH SCHOOL AMATEUR RADIO CLUB
Tommy Rockford, K6ATX, President

"Spud," Tommy said enthusiastically, "you're a real artist. This beats anything I could do. That neat lettering job—wow!"

Spud squirmed like a worshipful cocker spaniel. In school socie-

ty, he was definitely the lowest man on the freshman totem pole. Physically he was on the frail side, and as the only child of Santa Bonita's aggressive newspaper publisher, Chester Kleveland, Spud had led a life too sheltered for his own good. The greatest honor that had ever come his way was being appointed official waterboy to the football varsity this past season.

By contrast, blue-eyed Tommy Rockford was a husky six-footer from the top of his head to the cleats of his football shoes. Three gold stripes on the olive-green sweater he was wearing attested to as many seasons as varsity fullback.

"Aw, you could have done a better job," Spud protested loyally. "Everything you do is super, Tommy, everybody knows that."

Such hero worship embarrassed Tommy. On the gridiron he could ignore the adulation of the teenage girls in the stands. In his favorite classroom—the electronics lab—he could maneuver a soldering iron through the complicated innards of electrical equipment with as much aplomb as a master surgeon. But as an artist—well, Spud had him beat all hollow.

"Let's go hang this, huh?" Tommy said, escorting Spud up the corridor. "Spud, I've often wondered—why haven't *you* taken up ham radio for a hobby?" As president of the high school radio club, Tommy felt that every normal boy should share his unbounded enthusiasm for amateur radio.

Spud hurried to open the big swinging doors, with Tommy carrying the poster carefully. "Well—" Spud hesitated. "The truth is, my folks think ham radio is too dangerous, electricity and all."

Tommy opened the glass door of the Science Building bulletin board and started tacking Spud's poster in a conspicuous spot.

Spud Kleveland, he was thinking, was a nice kid, but slow in growing up. Tommy had always felt a little sorry for him, without quite realizing why he should.

One thing, there was three years' difference in their ages, and their social backgrounds were poles apart. As publisher of the daily *News-Star*, Spud's father was one of the most influential men in the community, whereas Tommy's folks made a modest living operating a travel agency.

"Spud," Tommy said as he closed the bulletin board, "your dad's mistaken about ham radio being dangerous. The voltages in an average ham transceiver, like my HW-5400 for instance, aren't nearly as high

as you'd find in the TV set in your living room. I think you'd make a darn good ham."

Spud flushed with pleasure. "I've never even seen a ham radio station," he admitted. "I've always wanted to."

"Look," Tommy said. "My dad and mother are in Hawaii sampling one of those two-week economy tours they peddle—you know. Well, tomorrow night, nine o'clock sharp, I've got a date to talk to 'em by ham radio, see? How'd you like to come over to my place and sit in, look over my hamshack, and say howdy to my folks across two thousand miles of ocean?"

Spud's eyes lighted up. "Say, that would be terrific. I didn't know your folks were radio hams too."

"They aren't," Tommy explained. "They'll visit a military amateur station in Honolulu—they call 'em MARS stations—and talk from there. Nine o'clock sharp, Saturday night. Why not drop around—and bring your father with you? Let him see what amateur radio is, what it can do."

Spud looked dubious. "I'll ask him," he said, "but...I don't know. Dad's always so busy. *I'll* be there, though, that's for sure." The boy glanced at his watch and gave a start. "Gosh, I'll be late to class. See you tomorrow night, Tommy, and thanks a million for inviting me—"

As Spud scurried off through the swinging doors of the Science Building, another tardy student came galloping up the granite steps three at a time. Tommy recognized Roy MacCormack, a fellow radio ham, making his usual breathless effort to beat the last bell to Physics IV.

"Go into a sprint," Tommy yelled, "and you might make it—"

But Roy had an overdeveloped bump of curiosity—especially when a new notice went up on the radio club's bulletin board. Now, feigning blindness as he stared at Spud's colorful poster, Roy came to a skidding stop alongside Tommy.

"If I'm late," Roy panted out his inevitable alibi, 'it's the zoology teacher's fault. She took a dim view of my defining a dinosaur as a 'colossal fossil with a docile tassel'...What have we here for the tireless wireless gang, son?"

Like Tommy, Roy was approaching eighteen, a senior majoring in science. There the resemblance between the two ended, however. Whereas Tommy excelled in sports, Roy's only exercise was these

hourly sprints between classes.

"Tommy, old pal old pal," Roy said after reading the poster, "I'm afraid you've goofed this time, putting the sheriff on your program. Better rip that thing down before it causes a lot of trouble."

Tommy said, "Nothing doing. Christmas vacation starts tomorrow and the meeting isn't until the twenty-seventh. I want to make sure Ross has a good crowd."

Roy bent a strange look at Tommy. "That's just the point. Who does the sheriff think he's kidding, anyway? I mean, why go out of his way to stir up trouble for himself?"

Tommy was mystified by Roy's vehemence. "Huh?" he said. "Say that over again, slow. What kind of trouble?"

Roy jabbed Tommy's bulletin board with a thumb. "You don't get what I'm trying to tell you, chum? This fighting crime waves with radio waves stuff. It's dynamite, boy."

"I don't understand you yet, Roy."

"Can you imagine what that lecture title would do to Chet Kleveland's newspaper? I can just see the headlines now: Quote, why doesn't our sheriff fight gangsters with guns instead of gadgets, question mark, end quote. There are some folks in town," Roy added enigmatically, "who think our pal Ross Jackson is riding to a fall, Tommy. Sort of irresponsible—"

Tommy cut in angrily, "Any guy who came back from Vietnam loaded with as many medals and citations as Ross did isn't irresponsible. Since he's—"

The bell sounding the start of the final period of the school day made both boys jump.

"Apparently you haven't read this morning's LA papers," Roy called over his shoulder as he raced for the door. "Our pal the sheriff has got troubles, my friend. Troubles."

Blended anger and bewilderment crossed Tommy Rockford's face as he watched Roy disappear. He had always resented the *News-Star*'s opposition to Ross Jackson as being "too young and inexperienced" to be sheriff of Santa Barbara County. From the very outset of Jackson's term of office, the paper had attacked the young lawman at every opportunity, the favorite charge being extravagance with the taxpayer's money in buying electronic equipment.

Of late, the *News-Star* had been especially bitter over what editor Chester Kleveland termed Jackson's efforts to convert the sheriff's

department into a "pushbutton fantasy borrowed from a pseudo-science novel." It seemed quite beyond Editor Kleveland's comprehension that law enforcement officers should take advantage of such scientific marvels as television, radar, shortwave communications, radioteletype and data transmissions.

But to Santa Bonita's future voters—the teenage generation—Sheriff Ross Jackson was at once a hero and an example.

Tommy Rockford had idolized Ross Jackson ever since he had joined the Boy Scouts and become a member of the sheriff's troop. It was Ross Jackson who had taught Tommy the International Morse code for his radio merit badge. Later it was the sheriff who had coached him in radio theory and regulations, enabling him to pass his amateur radio license examination before the local team of accredited examiners and receive his license from the Federal Communications Commission, which authorized him to operate his own radio station, K6ATX.

Perhaps even more important than introducing him to an absorbing, worthwhile hobby, Sheriff Jackson had influenced Tommy to choose the vital field of electronics as his life work.

And now Roy was saying that Ross Jackson was in trouble...

Tommy turned away from the bulletin board, lost in his own thoughts, and collided head on with the instructor of his Advanced Radio class, Dave Ormsby.

"Oops—sorry, sir." Tommy laughed, picking up his teacher's briefcase. "I was—all shaken up over something Alfa Mike Delta told me about the sheriff just now—"

"Roy MacCormack?" Mr. Ormsby asked, recognizing the phonetics of young MacCormack's radio call, W6AMD. "What's bothering him—aside from almost flunking my course this semester?"

Tommy grinned bleakly. "I doubt if he's worried about his grades. Dave, why does the *News-Star* keep needling Ross Jackson about using science to fight crime?"

The twinkle went out of Dave Ormsby's eyes.

"Apparently you haven't seen this morning's Los Angeles newspapers about Santa Bonita's crime situation?"

Tommy shook his head. "Folks are away, Dave, so I overslept—haven't read any papers. But what about local crime? There isn't any to speak of. Ross Jackson doesn't have half the juvenile delinquency or drug problems other counties do."

"Not according the to Los Angeles *Press*, Tommy."

"What did the *Press* say?" Tommy demanded.

Ormsby said evasively, "See me after school and I'll be glad to brief you on the situation, Tommy. Right now I've got an appointment with the principal."

Tommy said listlessly, "I'm on my way home, sir. No more classes. I have to drive out to the wharf to meet the Marine Biology class at four thirty—promised to pick up Doc Baldwin. He's out on a field trip today—or whatever you call a boating expedition."

Dave Ormsby unlocked his briefcase and drew out a folded newspaper.

"In that case," he said, "I'll give you this afternoon's *News-Star*. It'll let you see what Ross Jackson is up against."

The newspaper Mr. Ormsby handed him had hit the street only an hour or two ago. An eight-column triple-banner headline splashed across the front page:

LOCAL SHERIFF TINKERS WHILE SANTA BONITA BURNS; SPENDS TAX MONEY FOR GADGETS, GANGSTERS MOVE IN

The headlines referred to a front-page editorial by Chester Kleveland, rather than a news story.

Knots of muscle grated in the corners of Tommy's jaws as, oblivious to all else, he read Kleveland's scathing attack on his sheriff friend:

> Press dispatches from Los Angeles last night reveal that the so-called "Purple Shirt Mob" led by the FBI's Number-One-rated criminal, Grote Slankard, has extended its smuggling operations inside the boundaries of our own Santa Bonita County.
>
> According to reliable FBI sources, Slankard's smuggling ring has actually delivered cargoes of narcotics, counterfeit money, Mexican nationals, and contraband liquor into our very midst.
>
> The *News-Star* demands to know why we learn this shocking news from the lips of some drug addict picked up in a Los Angeles gutter a hundred miles away, instead of from the official chosen by the voters to protect our homes, families and property from gangland invasion—Sheriff Ross

Jackson?

If Sheriff Jackson is too inexperienced, too incompetent, or too indifferent to cope with...

Tommy Rockford lowered the newspaper, the blood pounding in his temples.

The Purple Shirt Mob, operating here? The boy turned his eyes away from the high school campus to take in the majesty of the four-thousand-foot Santa Ynez mountains looming purple and rose against the midwinter sky, a backdrop for one of the most beautiful cities in California. Tommy had spent all his life in this seaside town; all he knew of gangsters and organized crime was what any kid would pick up from the papers or television.

Now the Purple Shirt Mob was suddenly focused into something real and malignant, where before it had been merely a name, a shadow. He had heard about Grote Slankard for years—a highly educated veteran of World War II, an Air Force pilot and, in civilian life, an electronics engineer, who had turned his training and his talent into a life of crime.

Grote Slankard, like Sheriff Jackson, believed in putting modern technology to work. That was why the Purple Shirt Mob was known to employ radio, airplanes, parachutes, computers, even radar-equipped speedboats in their smuggling operations off the Southern California coast.

Up to now, the mob had confined its criminal activities to the Los Angeles area, so far as the public knew. Grote Slankard's headquarters were variously placed on a ship at sea or deep in the wastelands of Old Mexico below San Diego.

But now, according to the angry editorial by Spud Kleveland's father, Slankard's mob was thrusting its slimy tentacles ninety miles up the California coast to threaten lovely Santa Barbara County.

The effrontery of it, the brazen outrage of it made Tommy's blood run hot, the way it did when some dirty player clipped him in a football game when the officials weren't looking.

Roy was right. The sheriff was in trouble. And when a man is in trouble he needs his friends solidly behind him. If Sheriff Jackson was up against organized crime, then Tommy Rockford counted the Purple Shirt smugglers his own enemies, too.

CHAPTER TWO

The further he read in Chester Kleveland's *News-Star* editorial, the angrier Tommy Rockford became at what he felt was an unsportsmanlike attack on his best friend's integrity:

Young Sheriff Jackson became a national celebrity by developing a police radio network and scientific detection laboratory at the Santa Bonita courthouse.

We have no quarrel with scientific progress. We do feel Sheriff Jackson has gone overboard for impractical, expensive "gadgets."

Of what use against the Purple Shirt Mob, for example, is the $5,000 television monitor our sheriff uses for keeping watch on the jail cells by remote control?

Of what use against the Purple Shirt Mob is the costly radar "eye" Sheriff Jackson has installed in the county's patrol plane?

While Sheriff Jackson has been diverting manpower to keep electronic gear functioning, the Los Angeles underworld has been landing contraband on our county soil by air and sea.

The *News-Star* believes it is high time for Jackson and his technicians to leave the laboratory and start patrolling Santa Barbara County's coastline and mountainous interior, where the smugglers are known to be operating.

In the light of this week's announcements by the FBI concerning smuggling activities in our own backyard, the

News-Star believes the time has come to institute a recall election and oust Ross Jackson from office. It is to be hoped that the incumbent sheriff will save the taxpayers the cost of such an election by voluntarily resigning in the interests of the public welfare.

By his demonstrated inability to cope with big-time criminals in this area, Sheriff Jackson owes it to his constituents to turn in his badge...

Jamming the newspaper into a handy trash can, Tommy thrust his hands deep in the pockets of his blue jeans and stalked moodily across the campus toward the Peabody Stadium parking lot where he kept his car.

With time to kill before he was due out at the Municipal Wharf to pick up his pal, Doc Baldwin, Tommy decided to drop by the courthouse and wish the sheriff well.

No doubt about it, Chester Kleveland's newspaper wielded a lot of influence with Santa Bonita voters. Up to now, Sheriff Jackson had been popular, despite the opposition of the *News-Star*. But if the Purple Shirt Mob was really moving in, voters might get panicky and start paying attention to Kleveland's threats about recall petitions and suchlike...

Reaching the jam-packed Students' Parking Lot, Tommy had no trouble locating his own car among the hundreds like it. His car sported a ten-foot chrome-plated whip antenna bolted to the rear bumper, with a gleaming copper loading coil which could be spotted a block away.

In Southern California, where the high school boy who didn't own his own car was the exception, Tommy Rockford was in a class apart. To him, a car wasn't something to speed around the countryside in. It provided the means of making a radio station mobile!

It was indicative of Tommy's preoccupation with the sheriff's troubles that he broke his invariable custom of turning on his receiver to see what was doing on the ham bands.

Gliding out the west gate of the parking lot, Tommy drove toward the Santa Bonita courthouse, etched against a deep-westered December sun. In that imposing building, largest and tallest in a city where earthquake ordinances limited buildings to four stories, Sheriff Ross Jackson presided over the county jail, radio control station and laboratory.

Tommy's spirits were at a low ebb. He thought of his mother's

recipe for beating the blues: when you feel low, just count your blessings, Mom always said.

Well, he had plenty of blessings to count. This was three thirty on a warm Friday afternoon in December. The high school's two-week Christmas vacation stretched ahead, and he had a pair of tickets to the New Year's Day Rose Bowl game in Pasadena, for himself and Doc Baldwin, to top off the holidays.

He had a part-time job at Val's Wholesale Radio Supply, which would earn him enough money during the vacation to make the final payment on the new Heathkit HW-5400 radio transceiver, which was the pride and joy of his life and the envy of less fortunate teenagers in the town.

Even the future was bright. At assembly this week, the principal of SBHS had announced that Tommy Rockford had been awarded the annual four-year engineering scholarship at Cal Tech, by virtue of being the outstanding senior classman in pre-engineering. What more could a guy ask of life?

But counting his personal blessings didn't help Tommy's depression one iota. All he could think about was Sheriff Ross Jackson having to fight off a hostile press with one hand while he grappled with big-time racketeers with the other...

He swung his rusty sports car south on Santa Barbara Street and parked in front of the city jail behind a black Cadillac he recognized as belonging to Chester Kleveland.

Ross Jackson was probably the only sheriff in the country whose jail was a tourist attraction the year round. Santa Bonita's courthouse was far-famed for its imposing architecture. It was built along the lines of a Moorish castle with towering archways, loopholed turrets, sunken gardens, railed galleries, domed roofs, and landscaping lush with banana trees, bougainvillaea, gardenia bushes, jacaranda trees and lofty palms.

Tommy was blind to all this beauty as he headed down the ramp leading to the city's basement garage, his usual shortcut to the sheriff's office. For several years Tommy had enjoyed free run of the sheriff's office, and was on first-name speaking acquaintance with every deputy on the staff.

A self-operated elevator took him one floor up and let him out in Jackson's new and ultramodern Communications Room. There he found Deputy Hugh Britton—who off duty was radio ham W6OQX—

manning the short-wave console which kept Ross Jackson's office in close touch with radio-equipped patrol cars twenty-four hours a day.

"Congrats on the scholarship deal, kiddo," Britton greeted him, glancing away from the television monitor which told him what was going on in any of the three cellblocks in the jail upstairs. "It couldn't have happened to a better guy."

"Aw," Tommy said with an attempt at levity, "you're just saying that because it's obviously true. . . Brit, I just heard about that Purple Shirt Mob business. Is that newspaper talk, or—"

Deputy Britton shook his head glumly. "Afraid it's true, Tommy. FBI has proof that Slankard dropped a big narcotics shipment into the Lompoc area, by parachute. And—"

A door opened and Jimmy Webster, chief criminal deputy on the staff, appeared, wearing a white-lipped, thundercloud expression. With a preoccupied nod at Tommy, Webster bit out, "Kleveland's in the teletype room trying to make Ross agree to resign. To save the taxpayers the cost of recalling him and electing a new sheriff. Phooey."

As Jimmy Webster stormed out, Deputy Britton winked and gestured toward the soundproof glass wall of the radioteletype room. Inside, Tommy caught sight of Sheriff Jackson, dressed neatly in tweeds, standing with arms folded across his chest facing Editor Kleveland, who was out of Tommy's view. It was obvious from Ross Jackson's expression that he was controlling his temper with an effort.

"Mr. Kleveland isn't being fair," Tommy burst out. "Just because he and Ross are in different political parties, he—"

"Switch it off, Tommy," Britton warned. "Our crusading editor is coming out now, and he looks unhappy. Guess the boss won't play ball with him and quit."

The door of the RTTY room was jerked open to reveal a tall, gray-haired man in his late forties who looked perpetually rumpled and harassed.

Newspaper publisher Chester Kleveland came from a pioneer Santa Bonita family and the influence his paper had wielded in the community was tremendous. His patriotism was unquestionable—Kleveland's war record was nearly as illustrious as Sheriff Jackson's—and he was constantly working for better roads, hospitals and other community projects.

But Chester Kleveland had one obsession, and that was guarding the public funds. Enemies called him a "self-appointed watchdog of

the county exchequer." For the past couple of years, Kleveland's *News-Star* had singled out the sheriff's department of the city government as the target for his waste-in-office charges.

"But confound it, Ross," Kleveland was saying, "you know there is nothing personal in this. I respect you as a person. But your constant waste of money on impractical electronic contraptions—you forget this is a small town of fifty thousand, not New York or—"

At that moment Chester Kleveland caught sight of Tommy.

"I'll tell you what, Ross," the editor said, as Jackson joined him at the doorway of the RTTY room. "Here's a future taxpayer and voter. Tommy is a typical teenager, and teenagers have a lot of common sense. We'll ask his opinion... Tommy, see that TV screen yonder?"

Tommy glanced at the TV monitor which, at the moment, showed a group of prisoners working with mops and buckets on a cellblock three floors overhead. "Yes, sir," he said.

"That television outfit cost the taxpayers of this county over five thousand dollars to install," Kleveland said, "just so our friend the sheriff could see what was going on upstairs without stirring from his office chair. Now does that strike you as sensible, when five thousand dollars could have gone toward a new Bookmobile, a new ambulance—"

Tommy said carefully, "I believe the TV monitor made it possible for Mr. Jackson to release two fulltime jail guards for duty elsewhere, without adding to the city payroll, Mr. Kleveland. I imagine the salaries of those deputies amount to considerably more than the cost of the television monitor, and a television eye never gets sleepy or looks the other way—"

Over at the radio console, Deputy Britton made a sputtering sound behind his hand and quickly turned it into a cough to cover up. Ross Jackson seemed absorbed in watching a fly crawl across the ceiling.

Editor Kleveland stared at the boy before him, at a loss for words.

"I—don't mean to sound impertinent, sir," Tommy added, "but this is the 1980s, not the 1930s—"

Suddenly the expression on Kleveland's face relaxed. He shot a quick look at Britton and the sheriff, and then the corners of his mouth quirked up in a grin.

"Wow!" he chuckled. "I walked into that one, didn't I? Picked

on the wrong example, and picked on the wrong witness. Tommy, you force me to make a strategic withdrawal and regroup my forces."

As Kleveland headed for the door, Tommy called after him, "Mr. Kleveland, I've invited Spud over to my radio shack tomorrow evening to hear me talk with my folks in Honolulu. I'd sure like it if you'd come along too—"

Hand on doorknob, Kleveland turned, his mind already engrossed on his many pressing problems.

"Thank you, Tommy. Thanks very much. If I possibly can I'd like to come. If I don't, please remember me to your folks."

When Kleveland had gone, the tension in the office broke. Hugh Britton dissolved into a helpless spasm of laughter and Ross Jackson pumped Tommy's hand.

"You really set Kleveland back on his heels," the sheriff said. "Thanks, Tommy. The *News-Star* is going to point out tomorrow that what I spent on computers this past quarter would have endowed a hospital room for twenty years or something."

Even after two terms in office, Ross Jackson was still the youngest sheriff in California. Physically he and Tommy were almost twins in height and weight, with Jackson showing the kind of man Tommy would become at maturity. In Vietnam, Ross Jackson had been a bomber pilot, twice wounded by flak. As a civilian he held a pilot's license and often patrolled the county in the sheriff's reconnaissance plane.

The squawk box over Deputy Britton's rack-mounted radio gear began blaring, at which Tommy and the sheriff withdrew into the soundproof teletype booth.

"We who are about to die salute you," Ross quipped, running his fingers through his rumpled hair. "Kleveland really brought his heavy artillery to bear on me."

"That Kleveland," Tommy bit out. "How can such a nice guy, most of the time, be such a stinker part of the time? And why does he have to pick on you?"

Ross shrugged. "It's because he's old-fashioned, I guess. And this Purple Shirt Mob moving in—it could cost me my job yet, Tommy."

"You wouldn't resign—"

"Heck, no—I just told Kleveland that. Maybe he's bluffing about

stirring up a recall election, I don't know. But he's after my scalp and my badge, that's for sure."

Tommy gulped hard. For want of something to say, he asked, "Why would Grote Slankard and his gangsters pick on this county, anyway?"

The taut grin faded from Jackson's lips. "Why, Santa Barbara County is an ideal spot for smugglers to operate, Tommy. Look at the map." He gestured toward the large-scale chart of Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties which occupied the entire rear wall of the radioteletype room.

"We've got a hundred and fifty miles of shoreline to patrol," Jackson pointed out, "most of it as wild and isolated as Robinson Crusoe ever found on his desert island. And the inland area—ninety per cent of it is mountainous, uninhabited primitive territory in the Los Padres National Forest, biggest in America. Did you realize that Santa Barbara County is actually larger than the whole State of Delaware? And it's only two easy hours' driving time from the metropolitan Los Angeles area. It's a smuggler's paradise, this county."

Tommy fingered his lower lip thoughtfully. "Any idea how Slankard does his smuggling?"

The sheriff fired up his briar pipe. "The FBI has some pretty definite dope on that, Tommy. They know he has a contact man set up for business somewhere in our county. Maybe he's living in some motel right here in town, for all we know. This agent keeps rendezvous with Slankard's smuggling boats and airplanes at widely separated times and places."

"Airplanes can't land in very many places in this area, can they?"

"Who said they landed? The plane arrives at a secret rendezvous point—in the mountains, on the beach, anywhere—and swaps signals with the confederate on the ground. If the coast is clear, the contraband is dumped from the plane by parachute."

"How can the FBI know all this?" Tommy asked.

The sheriff blew twin ribbons of smoke from his nostrils. He said heavily, "Well, just for example. Last winter a uranium prospector over on the Mojave Desert saw a private plane drop a small parachute into a canyon where he was working. High winds diverted the 'chute to the prospector's camp. The box on the end of that 'chute carried

half a million dollars' worth of cocaine out of South America. It's fairly well known that Slankard's Purple Shirt Mob has connections with subversive elements, trying to undermine our country. The FBI is pretty sure the plane was Grote Slankard's, based somewhere in Mexico."

A teletype machine started clattering. Always fascinated by a typewriter which appeared to be operated by invisible fingers—activated by an operator a hundred miles away in the headquarters of the Los Angeles Metropolitan Police, in this case—Tommy watched the type bars rattle off their message:

SPECIAL ATTN COASTAL CITIES SAN DIEGO TO MONTEREY

BE ON WATCHOUT FOR TWIN SCREW FORTY FOOT CABIN CRUISER "SKIPALONG."

THIS BOAT BELIEVED TO BE USED BY PURPLE SHIRT MOB IN CONTACTING SUPPLY SHIP ON HIGH SEAS.

HAS BEEN UNREPORTED AT BALBOA YACHT BASIN PAST TEN DAYS, OSTENSIBLY RENTED BY SPORTSMEN FOR DEEP SEA FISHING OFF CATALINA.

IF "SKIPALONG" PUTS IN FOR FUEL OR REPAIRS NOTIFY COAST GUARD IMMEDIATELY...

When the message was complete Sheriff Jackson ripped the yellow paper off the platen and impaled it on a wall spike labeled WATERFRONT SQUAD.

"You see," the sheriff said wearily, "we've got to watch the sky, the ocean, the incoming highways, all at once. We need three times as many men and patrol cars and boats as we have. And when I try to cut corners by using scientific equipment to save manpower, the *News-Star* accuses me of extravagance and daydreaming..."

Tommy glanced at his watch. "I'll have to scoot along, pal. Promised Doc I'd pick him up at the wharf at four thirty. Just wanted to—well, let you know I'm back of you a thousand per cent, Ross."

They left the noisy teletype booth. The sheriff said, "Thanks, Tommy. I know I can always count on you. And it helps to know that, believe me it does. Seventy-three pal."

"Seventy-three, sheriff."

Tommy left the courthouse with that radio phrase warming his heart. "Seventy-three" was slang borrowed from the old-time railroad telegraph operators of a bygone generation because it had a rhythmic beat when translated into dots and dashes.

Seventy-three meant "best regards." And between these two, sheriff and high school senior, the term had a far deeper meaning—an affection as warm as if they had been father and son.

CHAPTER THREE

Five minutes later Tommy was cruising south on State Street, main thoroughfare of the city, which led to the foot of the Municipal Wharf. To get his mind off Editor Kleveland, Sheriff Jackson and invading smugglers, he switched on the "homebrew" radio station he had installed compactly under the dashboard.

Tommy spun the dial to tune the 75-meter phone band. A moment later he picked up a voice calling "CQ," the general inquiry used by hams the world over in search of a contact. This one proved to be station W7RDR in the village of Ocean Park, Washington, over a thousand miles to the north.

Tommy lifted his microphone from its bracket on the steering column, debating whether to answer. The W7 was probably a fixed station, running two or three hundred watts of power, whereas Tommy's mobile transceiver set-up could hardly be counted on for a thousand mile hop in daylight.

The matter was taken out of his hands a moment later when he heard W7RDR coming back to a W5 in Del Rio, Texas, stating that his name was Lyle and how was the weather down thataway?

Leaving Texas and Washington to get acquainted, Tommy tuned off the frequency, crossed Oceanside Boulevard and drove his car onto the rumbling plank deck of the city's pleasure pier. This extended a quarter mile over the harbor waters to the municipal boat landing, where he would be picking up Doc.

Doc Baldwin had been Tommy's inseparable companion since their days at Roosevelt Elementary School. They had enrolled together in Cub Scouts, YMCA swimming classes, Sunday School choirs, summer camping trips to Catalina Island. It was a dismal prospect

for them both that next autumn would see their paths separate at last, Doc to pursue a pre-med course at Stanford University, Tommy to study electronics at the California Institute of Technology at Pasadena.

The parking area at the end of the wharf was more congested than usual, due to the Christmas holiday influx of out-of-town visitors. Finding a parking slot between a wine-colored German sports car and a yellow and white sedan with Pennsylvania plates, Tommy eased into the space, set his brake and switched off the engine.

His view of the ocean, beginning to catch the tint of approaching sunset outside the breakwater, was blocked by two portly ladies who were leaning over the rail drinking in the incomparable vista which the Santa Bonita Chamber of Commerce had been plugging for years.

The city, from this off-shore vantage point, was a sight to thrill even the most jaded tourist, Tommy had to admit. In the foreground was the yacht basin, dotted with scores of pleasure craft from tiny flatties to millionaires' cruisers. Tall, full-skirted palm trees rimmed the four-mile crescent of silvery beach and the six-lane marine boulevard, aflame with poinsettias and geraniums, which flanked the shoreline.

Santa Bonita itself, reflecting its century-old Spanish California heritage in adobe walls and tile roofs, occupied a sloping coastal shelf which extended from the ocean to the foothills. Over all the coast range nountains loomed, beginning to stain magenta and rose and gold at lay's end. The lofty peaks looked deceptively near in what the Chamber of Commerce called "our triple-distilled, one hundred per cent smog-free air."

It was this peaceful, semitropical paradise that mobsters like Grote Slankard and his Purple Shirt Mob would invade, Tommy thought bitterly. He thought again of the teletype message alerting police in coastal cities to be on the watch for a suspected smuggling boat, the *Skipalong*. That boat could be moored out there right this minute...

The loudspeaker under the dash suddenly came to life: "CQ 75, CQ 75, calling CQ—this is W6AMD, A Million-Dollar station in Poverty Flats, north of Santa Bonita calling CQ on seventy-five meters and listening for a call. Come in somebody please?"

Tommy grinned. W6AMD was none other than Roy MacCormack, who, Tommy assumed, was having to stay after school to make up for being late to Physics IV.

Reaching for his mike, Tommy pushed the button which switched his rig from receive to transmit.

"W6AMD, Any Missouri Donkey, here is K6ATX, Always Take X-lax, mobile-at-rest in Santa Bonita... Where are you calling from, Roy? The principal's office? The closet where they keep the dunce caps? Go ahead."

The two lady sightseers at the railing turned curiously as the speaker answered, "K6ATX mobile, this is ol' W6AMD right back... Hi, Tommy. Nope, I'm home on the ancestral lemon ranch, twelve safe miles from Physics IV. You see, your stopping me made me so late, I didn't dare go to class at all, so I ducked out and slunk home. Where-all-at are you, son?"

"End of the wharf," Tommy answered, to the amazement of the two women who were not aware of the microphone cupped in his hand. "Waiting for Doc's biology class boat to get in."

A man wearing a black beret and a gaudy Hawaiian sports shirt squeezed in alongside Tommy's car, momentarily diverting his attention, and slipped under the wheel of the wine-red foreign sports car.

"Say, Roy," Tommy went on, "I think I heard a breaking station just as you signed it over to me. So back to you, with a pause for the break to identify. Might be Asia, hi."

Again on receiving position, Tommy's radio gave out with a crisp voice which he recognized as belonging to Dave Ormsby, their radio teacher at school:

"K6ATX, with W6AMD on the side, here is W6JMW, mobile-in-motion on Milpas Street... Howdy, fellows. I just wanted to warn a certain hookey-player that I've been monitoring the frequency and that it will be my painful duty, immediately after Christmas vacation, to notify the truant officer that a certain Physics IV student goofed off today without valid excuse."

Unable to restrain their curiosity, the two ladies edged away from the railing to eavesdrop unashamedly on the two-way radio conversation. The man in the beret climbed out of the sports car and Tommy saw him, via the rearview mirror, inspecting his bumper-mounted radio antenna.

Dave Ormsby went on, "Roy, if you're really transmitting from your home QTH, you got there in much less time than the law allows. That's strictly Sick Bird. Ill Eagle. Get it? Over."

Tommy spoke in a quick aside to the women at his elbow, "That

was our high school radio instructor, talking to a kid who lives up north of town ten miles or so. Listen to 'em giving each other a hard time—"

The two women tittered, getting into the spirit of the play-by-play as Roy MacCormack's anguished wail issued from the speaker: "Mr. Ormsby, puh-*lease* don't sa-a-ay things like that over the air. The truant officer might be listening, you know—he happens to be K6GHU...Back to you W6 Juliet Mike Whiskey, with K6ATX in the wheelbarrow listening. This is W6AMD standing by with earmuffs for possible insults."

There was a pause, which Tommy knew meant that Dave Ormsby was trying to think up some suitable rejoinder. But with the possible exception of Sheriff Jackson, no mere adult could hope to parry the repartee of a clown like Roy.

One of the women at Tommy's elbow cleared her throat apologetically and said, "Excuse me for speaking to a perfect stranger this way, young man, but my sister and I are from Boyertown, Pennsylvania, and it just occurred to us, maybe you—"

She was cut off by Ormsby's belated rejoinder: "...this is W6JMW mobile, returning for a shorty final. Guys, I'm sorry, I'm pulling into the supermarket parking lot now, so I'll have to QRT. Over to you, Tommy, and I'll see you on the Midnight Modulators' ragchew Monday night, if not sooner."

After Ormsby had signed clear Tommy switched quickly to transmit and said, "Roy, a lady from Pennsylvania wants a word with me, so QRX one, will you?"

To the ladies Tommy said, "QRX one means 'stand by one moment,' in ham talk. That's how American hams can communicate with Eskimos and Zulus and Russians and Turks, you know. With International Q signals."

"Q signals?" the Pennsylvania lady echoed in a puzzled voice.

"Yes—it's a sort of worldwide shorthand that anyone can understand, regardless of language. Like QTH means your location, QRT means stop, QSO means a two-way talk, QRZ? means 'who's calling me?', QRM means interference—things like that."

The sisters exchanged amazed glances. "That *is* intriguing, isn't it, Liz? We were just wondering—if it wouldn't be imposing—if you could call a friend of ours back in Boyertown on the radio and—perhaps let us talk to him?"

Tommy squirmed uncomfortably, hating to disappoint anyone with such a naive faith that a ham could pinpoint a distant location on a moment's notice. In the rearview mirror he saw the man with the Hawaiian shirt listening in with an amused grin, as if to say "let's see you wriggle out of that one, sonny."

"Well," Tommy said, stalling a bit, "I'd be glad to, ma'am. All I need is your friend's radio call letters. Just like knowing his telephone number, you know. He's in the W3 zone—"

The women stared at each other blankly. One said, "What are Bill Clawson's call numbers, Liz? I know he's got a call, because he's always bragging about the radio cards he collects from all over the world—"

"Maybe," Tommy suggested, "your friend is an SWL instead of a radio ham."

"What's an SWL?"

"Short-wave Listener. That's a hobby where you listen to stations but you can't talk back—you collect QSL cards just like a ham does, but not for two-way QSOs."

Liz thought a moment. Then she said hopefully, "Can't you just call Bill's name and get him that way?"

"If he happens to be tuned in on my exact frequency, and if conditions happen to be favorable, yes; but I'd say the chances of hooking up with your friend were very, very slim."

The tourist ladies accepted their disappointment philosophically. "If radio is that haphazard," one of them complained, "I don't see how you get anyone to talk with at all."

Tommy laughed. "Ma'am, there are over four hundred thousand licensed hams in America, besides five hundred fifty thousand or more scattered all over the world. So there's never a lack of somebody to yak with. It's like being on a giant telephone party line—you put a call on the air and you never know who you'll hook. Maybe a cowboy in Texas, or a peasant in Siberia, or a diamond miner in South Africa, or a movie star in—"

Roy MacCormack's voice interrupted: "K6ATX, here is W6AMD. Sorry, but Mom just called me to my platter of dog-food, so I gotta pull switches. Apologize to the Pennsylvania parties."

"Will do, Roy. Seventy-three."

"Ditto," Roy chuckled. "Thanks and see you subsequently."

The ladies from Pennsylvania, after a few more minutes' friend-

ly chatter, suddenly remembered an appointment and made their departure.

Tommy was reaching into the glove compartment for his binoculars, intending to search the ocean to pick up Doc Baldwin's incoming boat, when a voice at his elbow startled him: "Pardon me, young fellow—would you mind answering a question about ham radio?"

It was the driver of the red Porsche, he of the black beret and Hawaiian sport shirt.

"Happy to." Tommy grinned. "I'd rather talk ham radio than eat."

CHAPTER FOUR

"I was noticing the license plates on your car," the stranger said. "K6ATX—apparently they are your radio call."

Tommy chuckled. "California issues personal plates to radio amateurs, sir—for around twenty-five bucks a year extra. In fact, most states grant that favor to hams. Sort of a thank-you, I guess, for the public service the guys render in time of floods and hurricanes and other emergencies."

The man leaned on the edge of the car window, peering in at the knobs, dials, meters and wires constituting Tommy's mobile radio station. He was a good-looking man with a suntan that looked rather recent, just starting to peel.

"I've always had a yen to take up ham radio myself," he said wistfully, "but I don't know a dot from a dash. And I'm probably too old to learn, now."

"Age doesn't mean a thing in this game, sir," Tommy said eagerly, sensing a chance to make a convert. "Why, we've got one guy here in town, W6ULS, Used Lip Stick, who got his Novice ticket when he was past eighty. He's having the time of his life."

"And what is a Novice ticket?"

"It's a ham license the government issues to beginning hams. Simple to pass, only five words a minute on code, and some basic radio theory and FCC regulations, and it puts you on the air for ten years. In a short time you've built your code speed up to where you can pass the General License, which gives you additional privileges. I know licensed hams who are only seven years old, in fact. Don't ever let your age hold you back, sir."

The stranger took out a cigarette pack, made as if to offer Tommy a smoke and then thought better of it, and lighted one for himself.

"If you don't mind a stranger asking so many silly questions about this radio business—"

"Go right ahead, right ahead!" Tommy urged. "I'd rather talk radio than eat steak, as I said before."

The man laughed. "I'm glad everyone isn't that enthusiastic about radio, or I'd go broke," he said. "I happen to operate a seafood restaurant down on the Santa Monica waterfront...Say, I might as well introduce myself. The name's Weldon. Tugwell Weldon—friends call me Tug."

They shook hands.

"And my handle is Tommy, Tommy Rockford, sir. Folks run the Channel City Travel Agency here in town. Up for the holidays?"

Tug Weldon drew thoughtfully at his cigarette. "No-o—I drove up the coast this morning to take delivery on a cabin cruiser I bought in Long Beach. The boatyard mechanic ran it up to Santa Bonita on a shakedown cruise, sort of, and he'll drive the Porshe back for me."

Tommy felt a tug of envy, looking at the sparkling red and chrome of the low-slung Porsche alongside. He was mentally figuring out where he would mount a multiband mobile antenna and the rig.

"I suppose," Tug Weldon spoke slowly, as if choosing his words with care, "that you are pretty sharp when it comes to receiving radio code, Tommy? Dots and dashes, I mean?"

The boy shrugged modestly. "Well, I handle traffic for the Mission Bell net three nights a week. You have to relay at thirty-five words a minute to stay in that league. Some of the guys with electronic keyers can go fifty a minute or better."

Tug Weldon waggled his head, trying to act impressed, although it was obvious that he probably wouldn't know a radio traffic net from a tennis net.

"This cruiser I bought," Weldon said, "has a two-way radio outfit on it. I've never operated it, of course. But maybe we could arrange a little chat over the air this weekend while I'm in harbor here, you suppose?"

At that moment Tommy's attention was momentarily diverted by the sight of a tuna clipper rounding the breakwater. It was festooned with the high school's olive and gold colors in bannering crepe paper. Across the harbor, mirror-smooth at day's end, came the sound of

shrill voices—Doc Baldwin's biology class, coming in on schedule.

Bringing his mind back to Weldon's proposal for a radio chat, Tommy said, "I'm afraid not, Mr. Weldon. You see, a ham has to stay on his own bands—eighty, forty, twenty and so on—and your ship-to-shore radiotelephone couldn't pick up my signals because you're probably crystal controlled on just five or six channels, like a TV receiver. And also, I doubt if you have your restricted radiotelephone permit from the Friendly Candy Company, if you just bought the boat."

"Friendly Candy—"

"FCC. Federal Communications Commission."

"I had no idea it was so complicated."

"Getting a ship-to-shore license? Nothing could be simpler. No tests, no code. Just like the radio gear on a taxicab or a moving van."

Weldon looked as if he had something on his mind. Finally he seemed to come to a decision, for he said with a vague sort of reluctance, "Tommy, uh, I wonder if you would mind coming down to the float and having a look at my radio outfit aboard the *Eye-Dull-Our.* That's this cruiser I'm buying. The mechanic is tuning up the diesels or something before we take a trial run out in the channel together, tomorrow morning."

Tommy climbed out of his car, his eye following Doc Baldwin's tuna clipper as it veered toward the wharf, its decks jammed with jubilant teenagers singing the school fight song at the top of their lungs.

Up on the roof of the pilot house he recognized Doc by the flash of sunset light on the chromium knobs and shiny case of the hand-held two-meter FM radio transceiver, small enough to slip into a shirt pocket, which Doc had taken along on today's biology cruise. Doc was ham station K6CRJ.

"I'd be glad to look your gear over, Mr. Weldon," Tommy said. "I'm meeting a guy off that tuna boat coming in, but he knows my junk heap here and he'll be waiting when I get back."

Mr. Weldon seemed uncommonly grateful for such a small favor, Tommy thought. He babbled apologies all the way down the cleated runway to the landing float.

At the far end of the float Tommy saw a trim cabin cruiser with EYE-DULL-OUR OF LONG BEACH painted across her mahogany stern counter. A marine mechanic in jeans, Navy cap and T-shirt was working in the after cockpit.

"That's her," Tug Weldon grinned. "A corny name. Supposed to mean *Idle Hour,* I suppose. I had a chance to buy it at a bargain. It will be nice for weekend fishing cruises."

A moment later Tommy Rockford was stepping from the float onto the leather-cushioned, semi-circular bench which rimmed the after cockpit of the *Eye-Dull-Our.* The burly mechanic looked up, scowling.

Weldon said, "This is Jigger O'Dell, Tommy—best boat engine man on the coast, but doesn't know beans about radio equipment. Jigger, meet Tommy Rockford. He's a radio expert. He's going to show me how to run the radiotelephone."

O'Dell growled surlily. "I hope he knows what he's doin'."

Tommy ducked down a short companionway into the cruiser's cabin. The *Eye-Dull-Our* was about forty feet long, with accommodations to sleep eight, and a fuel and food capacity for up to a month's cruising, Tommy guessed.

For a pleasure craft, it was exceptionally well fitted out with electronic navigational gear, his first glance at the instrument panel on either side of the wheel told him. His eyes lighted up with approval at the sonar depth finder, the radar with its ten-inch cathode-ray tube, the direction finder with its loop antenna and five-channel radio receiver.

"Looks like your ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore radio gear is in this direction finder, Mr. Weldon," Tommy said, going to the latter instrument. "Usually is, on small craft. Simple as pie to operate. Give me a minute to look 'er over and I'll demonstrate—"

"Go right ahead, Tommy. It's all Greek to me."

Tommy knelt down before the compact direction-finder unit. On the wall between it and the marine radar rig he noted a small framed document in a plexiglass window and recognized it as the official radiotelephone station permit assigned to this particular boat.

His glance shifted away from the permit holder, tracing a coaxial cable which apparently led topside to a remote loop antenna for the direction finder.

And then something made him look at the permit holder again. Something was wrong with that paper—and on his second look he saw what it was.

Someone had issued the wrong marine radio permit to the *Eye-Dull-Our*—because this card read:

Name of craft to which radiotelephone permit is assigned:
SKIPALONG
Registered owner of above craft:
RENT-A-BOAT, INC.
Home port of Craft:
BALBOA CALIF.

Never, under any circumstances, could a restricted radiotelephone permit be transferred from one boat to another. A station permit remained with a specific boat until it was junked or lost at sea.

If this was the *Eye-Dull-Our,* what was it doing with a radio permit issued less than a year ago to a craft registered as the *Skipalong*?

He turned toward Tug Weldon, who was sorting through papers in a map locker beside him. Tommy's mouth was open, ready to say, "Mr. Weldon, you've got the wrong radio permit assigned to this boat."

But the words never came. For Tommy suddenly remembered where he had heard the name *Skipalong* before. And that memory brought a cold knot of terror to the pit of his stomach.

CHAPTER FIVE

In his mind's eye, Tommy was back in the radioteletype room at the sheriff's office, reading an all-points bulletin being tapped off by the flying typebars.

A warning for all coastal towns to be on the lookout for a forty-foot cabin cruiser named the *Skipalong,* overdue from a fishing expedition out of Balboa.

The *Skipalong,* believed to be a contact boat used by the Purple Shirt Mob for meeting contraband runners outside the three-mile limit...

Tommy's tongue had a corrosive taste on it, his palate as dry as cotton. He came to his feet, hoping Tug Weldon didn't see the rime of cold sweat that had formed along his upper lip; he could see the shine of it reflected in the sloping windshields of the *Eye-Dull-Our*'s cabin.

Forcing himself to act as if nothing out of the ordinary was afoot, Tommy laid a hand on the radio receiver which formed a part of the direction finder aboard the cruiser.

"This couldn't be simpler to operate, Mr. Weldon." He indicated a channel selector dial. "It's just like a TV set, only you've got just five channels to worry about, each one pre-tuned to a fixed marine frequency."

He glanced up to see Weldon watching over his shoulder. For some reason he could not analyze, Tommy got the distinct impression that the man wasn't really interested in having his radio gear explained at all.

"You've got five channels here," Tommy went on. "Channel One

here is your ship-to-shore channel, the one you use to call KOU, the marine operator at San Pedro. She'll dial any telephone you want to talk to.

"This Channel Two is very important," Tommy went on, "because it's the distress frequency that the Coast Guard monitors all the time. If you ever got in trouble out at sea, you'd call for help on Channel Two.

"Channel Three is ship-to-ship, in case you see another boat and want to yak with him. Channel Four is another Coast Guard emergency calling frequency, and Channel Five is another ship-to-ship setting in case the first one is busy."

Weldon kept nodding his head, as if listening attentively, but there was a distracted expression in his eyes as if his mind were not on what Tommy was saying.

The same was true for the young radio ham. As he went on, explaining how to turn the set on and off, how to use the telephone type microphone handset, his brain was racing off on another tangent.

Someone must have painted a false name over the *Skipalong*'s stern to conceal its identity, just as auto thieves changed license plates on stolen vehicles. The *Skipalong* was registered out of Balboa; this cruiser was supposed to be out of Long Beach.

Tug Weldon's voice, casual and friendly, broke into the run of Tommy's panicked thoughts: "I'm very much obliged for all this help, Tommy. If it's that simple I'm sure I won't have any trouble. I'll feel safer, making my first solo cruise, knowing I can call for help in case of engine failure or something. I can't even swim."

Tommy's throat was dry and aching with suspense. He had to give this Tug Weldon the benefit of the doubt as to whether he was a criminal—or more specifically, a member of the Purple Shirt smuggling mob.

Weldon claimed to be buying this cruiser as a pleasure boat, and the mechanic outside, Jigger O'Dell, was tuning it up for him after a shakedown cruise up the coast from Long Beach.

Perhaps Weldon was buying the *Eye-Dull-Our* in good faith—totally unaware that he was buying stolen property which was the subject of a police tracer.

On the other hand, maybe Weldon and O'Dell were gangsters! Maybe they had stopped at Santa Bonita harbor to discharge a cargo of drugs, or fake money, or illegal aliens from Mexico. In any event,

Tommy knew he had to let Sheriff Jackson know this cruiser was in port, and the sooner the better.

Tommy forced himself to turn and look at Tug Weldon. The man was still sorting through a pile of geodetic survey sounding charts of the Santa Barbara Channel area hunting for something.

Was Weldon a gangster—or an innocent dupe picking up a stolen boat at a bargain?

The idea of this man being an outlaw Tommy had to reject as patently absurd. Weldon had a frank, open face; he looked you straight in the eye when he spoke, and Tommy had always heard that the mark of a crook was his inability to keep his gaze from shifting. Tug Weldon was no outdoorsman, not even a Sunday sailor; his sunburn, pink and mottled over a sallow skin, was normal for a restaurant owner who worked indoors most of the time.

Weldon's Hawaiian sport shirt, worn with the shirttail out, concealed no armpit-holstered pistol, no knife or blackjack. For a weekend traveler, his brown slacks and crepe-soled sandals were appropriate. The beret seemed a little silly to Tommy, but it was a common type of headgear in the southland, especially among movie studio people.

No, by no stretch of the imagination could this Tug Weldon be a big-time gangster. His mechanic out on the after cockpit, though—Jigger O'Dell—fitted the part of a thug to a T. He had a bent nose, the suggestion of cauliflowering on one ear, tattoos on his sun-blackened, hairy arms; any movie director would pick Jigger O'Dell for a thug's role.

"This—is a mighty fine boat you're buying, sir," Tommy said. "You say you're getting it at a bargain?"

He was fishing for information which he hoped would explain why the *Skipalong* had been renamed the *Eye-Dull-Our.*

"As cruisers go on the market these days, I consider it a bargain at twelve thousand." Weldon smiled. Lowering his voice, he gestured toward the rear companionway and whispered, "I don't want O'Dell to hear me say that, though. I'm buying it from his boss. New it retails at thirty thousand."

Tommy wanted to blurt out, "The reason you're getting such a bargain is because O'Dell's boss stole this boat from a rental firm, Mr. Weldon. They painted a new name on the back and they've probably forged registration papers, but they overlooked that FCC permit tucked in between the radar and the direction finder—"

But he didn't put his warning into words. After all, it was not his right to reveal a secret police communication. The thing to do now was get back to his wheels and streak back to the courthouse and report his discovery to Jackson's waterfront prowl car and deputy, Jimmy Webster.

"Well, I guess my friend's waiting for me by now," Tommy said. "It's been great meeting you, Mr. Wel—"

Weldon interrupted him quickly: "Before you go, I'd like you to hear a tape recording I made, Tommy. Can you spare a moment?"

"Sure," Tommy said reluctantly. "I'm—not going anywhere."

Tug Weldon unlocked a cabinet directly below the map cabinet and lifted out a tape recorder of expensive make.

"Since you're interested in radio," Weldon said, "you may appreciate some Hi Fi equipment I've picked up. I'm quite a fan in that field. I've taped my baby son's first cries at the hospital, my sister and her husband exchanging their wedding vows—"

Tug Weldon switched on the recorder, which apparently had been converted to operate off the *Eye-Dull-Our's* direct current electrical system. Amber and green jewels glowed on the control panel.

"Here's what I did," Weldon explained. "This morning, while Jigger was tinkering with the motors, I turned on that radio you were just explaining to me, and taped what signals I could pick up. Some of the noises are very puzzling to a rank beginner. Perhaps you can explain them for me."

A gnawing sense of distrust touched Tommy Rockford. Up to the moment of producing this tape-recording machine, Weldon's words and actions had seemed perfectly innocent, natural and normal; a businessman, buying a new plaything and wanting some expert advice on how to operate his radio equipment.

But now... Wanting him to analyze the sounds he had recorded off his marine receiver didn't ring true, somehow.

The recorder speaker broke into sound, the crackling of QRN static, the snap of a switch, then a man's voice saying "Ain't it about time?" and another voice—Weldon's, recorded with rare high fidelity indeed, replying "Fifteen seconds now."

That first voice—whose was it? A throaty, rasping quality... why, it was Jigger O'Dell's!

"There wasn't much on the air when I was testing out the set," Weldon said, "but any moment now you'll hear something I couldn't

identify at all—"

Tommy stifled an impulse to ask Weldon how he had been able to make a recording from his radio when, only a few moments before, he had pretended not to know how to turn the set on. Then he realized that Jigger O'Dell could have operated the receiver for his new boat owner.

Weldon was starting to speak again when a staccato burst of high-speed radiotelegraph code made the recorder's speaker cone rattle. But the signals, coming in bursts like machinegun fire, ended as abruptly as they came on, leaving only the hissing, frying sound of atmospherics on the tape.

"What on earth was that noise?" Weldon asked, turning off the tape. "Jigger thought it was a radioteletype machine. I wondered if it was a television picture being transmitted."

Tommy shook his head. "It was radio MCW, modulated continuous wave, a fast operator with an electronic keyer transmitting at about fifty words per."

Weldon regarded Tommy through narrowed lids. He was lifting his gold lighter to another cigarette as he said, "What did it say, Tommy?"

The boy shrugged. "Too fast for me. Thirty-five is about my limit." Suddenly Tommy scowled. "I don't understand it. I mean, your copying Morse code with this radiotelephone rig. You shouldn't be able to pick up code messages on either the ship-to-ship or ship-to-shore bands."

Weldon said suddenly, "I'll tell you what. This is very interesting —suppose I play it back at half speed. You could decipher the dots and dashes then, couldn't you?"

"Oh, sure, I could copy it solid at half speed."

Weldon set the recorder reels to reverse position, rewound several yards of tape, and started the tape at normal speed, finger ready on the speed control knob to reduce it by half when the time came for the burst of code.

Static noises crackled once more. Straining his ears, waiting for the MCW signals to start, Tommy became aware of other sounds, recorded with such fidelity that he had not been aware that they had come from the recorder speaker. A seagull's cry, the remote whoo-whooom of a whistle buoy, the lapping of waves against a boat hull.

O'Dell's question was repeated in froglike basso profundo, as

Weldon cut the tape speed to one half: "Ain't—it—about—time?" and Weldon's equally distorted lower register: "Fifteen seconds now..."

Weldon suddenly braked the recorder to full stop. From his shirt pocket he took a ball-point pen, which he handed to Tommy.

"Look, son," Weldon said hoarsely, "you can copy the message on this paper."

As he spoke, Weldon unfolded what appeared to be an auto club's road map of Santa Barbara County and spread it out on the plotting board above the radar gear.

"Ready to start again?"

Tommy nodded, not trusting himself to speak for fear his trembling voice would betray the horror congealing his veins.

He knew, now, by Weldon's tension, that translating this code was of vital importance to the man. It suddenly occurred to Tommy Rockford that he had been tricked into coming aboard the *Eye-Dull-Our* for some ulterior reason.

Weldon hadn't wanted Tommy's advice on how to run a simple foolproof radio set. Weldon, discovering him to be an amateur operator, had wanted his services as a skilled radio code copier.

But why?

Weldon switched on the tape again, running it at half speed. Tommy gripped his pencil, waiting for the mystery message to begin. Would he hear a gangster mob's secrets?

CHAPTER SIX

And then they started: crisp dots and dashes which, at half speed and bass pitch, still sent Tommy Rockford's pen racing across the blank white edge of the road map:

12-20-1815-F-8-R-K

Three times, the cryptic series of numerals and letters was repeated. The repetition brought out something else to Tommy's acutely trained ear: the final two letters, R and K, had been transmitted by a different radio station than the previous characters.

Tug Weldon was peering over the boy's shoulder, so close the warmth of his breathing fanned his ear. When the tape went silent, Weldon turned off the machine and said, "It doesn't make sense, does it, Tommy?"

The ham shook his head.

"Well, we know someone sent the same message three times to be sure it was copied. Another station acknowledged it each time with the letter R, which means 'received okay.' The letter K on the end there means 'go ahead.' "

"And it makes no sense to you?" Weldon insisted.

"None whatever, sir. Offhand, I'd guess it was a military operator who had let his VFO—his variable-frequency oscillator—drift so as to put his signals into the commercial marine phone bands. An army tugboat, maybe, or a navy dredge, or a battlewagon. They operate code in that region of the spectrum, I believe."

Weldon reached past Tommy and snatched the road map off the plotting board. It was, Tommy noted irrelevantly, an ordinary road map of the county, showing the coastline, which was put out free of

charge by the auto club.

"O'Dell was in the Navy in the last war," Weldon said. "I'll see if he can make any sense out of it. You wait here—"

Weldon turned and ducked out of the low-ceilinged cabin, slamming the teakwood companionway door behind him.

Tommy's heart was racing. Something was definitely wrong; he could sense it. Why should Weldon show such a keen interest in decoding a random signal he had taken off the air? And why was he showing Tommy's decoding to that illiterate-looking plug-ugly mechanic, O'Dell?

In sudden alarm, Tommy crossed the cabin and yanked at the brass doorknob. A spring lock had snapped when Weldon had closed the door. The wild thought flashed through the boy's head: *They've locked me up. I'm a prisoner.*

He lunged over to a six-inch porthole, clawing at the wing-nut clamp and getting the circular watertight window open. Cold salt air struck his hot cheek as he peered out the tiny opening.

Ten feet away, Weldon and Jigger O'Dell were down on their knees on the afterdeck, studying the Auto Club road map on the margin of which Tommy had written the radio message.

"F by 8 puts it about there," Jigger O'Dell was saying, tapping a point on the map with a greasy forefinger. "All of twenty miles from here, I'd say. Providin' Murdock is still using this auto club map. If he ain't, we're cooked."

Weldon said tensely, "Six fifteen doesn't give us any too much time, if it's today."

"It's today, all right. December twentieth. We don't have to guess on *that.*"

"Providing the kid copied that code correctly," Weldon commented. "And he's a pretty sharp operator, I think."

The two men exchanged glances. "We'll have to go up the line in the Porsche. This tub could never make it in time."

Weldon stood up. "I'll pay off the kid for his trouble, and meet you up on the wharf. Here's the keys."

Tommy ducked back from the porthole, his heart frozen in momentary terror. The payoff—was that gangster talk for killing a victim when he had served his purpose?

He looked around wildly for a weapon of some kind. Weldon was heading down the companionway steps; the cruiser lurched as

Jigger O'Dell stepped up to the float.

Tommy leaped back across the cabin and switched on the radio. The thought had occurred to him that he could switch on the cruiser's radiotelephone, dial the Coast Guard's emergency Channel Two, flip the mike to transmit position, and put out a call for help right from here—

But Tommy didn't have any time left. The cabin door opened and Weldon stepped in, thrusting the folded auto map into the pocket of his slacks. There was a deceptively mild look on his face, but his right hand was reaching under his shirttail for his hip pocket where, in TV thrillers, the villain always kept a small pistol or a switchblade.

Feeling like a trapped animal, Tommy was bracing himself to make a football tackle before Weldon could get his hand away from that pocket when the man said, "The mystery's solved, Tommy. About that code, I mean. O'Dell identified it."

A pent-up breath of relief whistled across Tommy's lips as he saw Weldon's right hand come in sight. It held a wallet, not a gun.

"What—was it?" Tommy croaked weakly.

"O'Dell used to work for the oil companies who do off-shore drilling. He said it was a hydrograph sounding report, something like that."

Weldon was lying now, Tommy knew that. He saw the man extract a twenty dollar bill from his wallet.

"I want you to be paid for your trouble, Tommy," Weldon said. "O'Dell needs an engine part at the ship chandler's and I've got to drive him over there before it closes. If this twenty—"

Tommy waved the money aside, trying not to remind himself twenty dollars represented one payment on his Heathkit transceiver.

"You don't owe me a thing, Mr. Weldon. Contrary to the spirit of amateur radio, you know, just like athletes in the Olympic Games or something." He grinned, just to ease the intolerable tension of his cheek muscles. "I've got to be scrambling along myself—keeping my buddy waiting up on the pier."

A moment later they were out of the cabin, leaping from the cockpit to the float. Tommy had never realized how wonderful the fresh sea air could feel on his face, after the buried-alive sensation he had experienced in the *Eye-Dull-Our's* cabin.

There was no trace of Jigger O'Dell. Weldon, obviously in a hurry to get away, pumped Tommy's hand and said something about being

glad to have made his acquaintance, and then Weldon had vanished up the ramp, murky with the onset of twilight.

When he was out of sight, Tommy turned and jumped back aboard the *Eye-Dull-Our*. Leaning over the stern rail, he scratched his fingernails across the letters painted there.

The marine varnish and the enamel under it were still tacky, scraping off to reveal the natural finish of the mahogany planking underneath. That told Tommy what he wanted to know. Whoever had changed the name of this cabin cruiser had done so very recently, and they had not just painted over the *Skipalong* name, they had sanded the original paint off, down to the wood.

Heading for the float, Tommy did some fast thinking. Without question this was the *Skipalong*. If O'Dell, for instance, had stolen this cruiser and repainted it, he had overlooked the telltale radio permit which listed the original registration of the craft.

But now, reflecting on the extreme hurry Weldon and O'Dell were in, Tommy became more than ever convinced that Weldon's sole purpose in striking up an acquaintance with him had been that he needed a radio expert to decipher a recorded code transmission.

How long ago the message had been recorded—or whether it had actually been recorded from the *Eye-Dull-Our*'s marine receiver at all—Tommy had no way of knowing. But whatever those cryptic figures and letters meant, they had put Weldon and his mechanic into a violent dither.

Tommy muttered aloud, "They've got to get some place at six fifteen, with twenty miles to go. And the map was an ordinary auto club radio map any tourist could pick up..."

Suddenly Tommy knew he had to find out for himself what Tug Weldon and Jigger O'Dell were up to. What if they *were* gangsters? It might save Sheriff Ross Jackson's political future if he could apprehend two members of the Purple Shirt gang!

Tommy raced up the gangway leading from float to wharf. Scrambling to the wharf-top level, twenty feet above the water, he was just in time to see Weldon's Porsche pull out of its parking place and head toward town. Jigger O'Dell was at the wheel, Weldon beside him.

A cry of relief welled from Tommy's lips when he saw Doc Baldwin at his car, stowing his two-meter transceiver in the glove compartment.

Doc was built more chunkily than Tommy, which accounted for his playing tackle on the football varsity. He wore horn-rimmed glasses which, with his moon-round face and brown collar-length hair, gave him an owlish expression. He wore sloppy blue jeans and a red woolen sweater across the front of which his girlfriend had embroidered his ham radio call letters, K6CRJ.

Doc—nicknamed because he intended to follow his father's career in medicine—waved and grinned as Tommy sprinted up.

"Wait'll you see my log, kid," Doc called out. "I worked an aeronautical mobile over Los Angeles this afternoon on 146 megs. Over one hundred miles, and me using only a nineteen-inch whip on my little hand-held rig, too. How about that, huh?"

Tommy, for once, did not respond to a fellow radio ham's triumph.

"Climb in and stop yakking, will you?" he yelled, vaulting into the car and shoving his keys into the ignition. "We're trailing a couple of gangsters, and I'm not joking, kid!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Doc Baldwin, long accustomed to Tommy's ebullient sense of humor, guffawed appreciatively as he climbed into the car. The next instant he yelped in dismay as Tommy backed out of the parking place, shifted gears, and sent the vehicle hurtling along the two-lane wharf as if he were racing on a drag strip.

"Are you nuts?" Doc howled. "Remember what your Dad said—one speeding ticket and you ride the old moped for a year—"

Tommy, ordinarily the most careful of drivers, only bore down harder on the gas pedal. "This is an emergency," he said grimly, switching on his headlights. "See that Porsche ahead, just crossing the railroad tracks?"

Doc squinted myopically into the gathering twilight, at the long canyon of twinkling neon lights marking State Street.

"The red one that just turned north onto Highway 101?"

"That's it. I'm not saying this for a fact, but the driver could be a Purple Shirt Mob smuggler! Wait'll you hear what happened. This stranger asks me if he could ask me a question, about ham radio, and I said I'd rather talk ham radio than eat—"

Doc squeezed his eyes shut as they neared the end of the wharf and the busy intersection of Oceanside Boulevard. Tommy was not even slowing down—if he tried to run a red light they would wind up in the hospital or morgue, Doc was sure.

Doc did not open his eyes again until the jolting told him they were crossing the Southern Pacific main line, a block north of the shore drive. Up ahead, the freeway lights marking Highway 101, the scenic route between Los Angeles and San Francisco, were red.

"Let me off at the stop, will you?" pleaded Doc. "I just remembered, I left my two-meter rig on the boat—"

"Liar! I saw you shutting that Ten-Tec hand-held into the glove compartment."

The lights went green, providentially, and Tommy put his car in a tire-squealing left turn off State onto the six-lane freeway. By the time he had reached the sweeping curve the road took to avoid the Mesa cliffs on the west side of town, he caught sight of the red Porsche dead ahead. O'Dell was cruising along at a steady fifty-five, about three blocks ahead.

"O'Dell is taking no chances of being stopped by a cop," Tommy said, checking his own speed to match the Porsche's.

"Who," moaned Doc Baldwin, "is O'Dell? And if you're not kidding about gangsters, why don't we give the sheriff's office a shout on the two-meter rig and have him set up a roadblock."

Tommy was more relaxed, now that he had nothing to do but keep his eye fixed to the Porsche's taillights ahead.

"I've been debating about that," he said, "but I don't dare. For one thing, that car may be equipped with a scanner—and for all I know, they could be monitoring the sheriff's frequency. In the second place, I haven't actually got any proof those two are gangsters."

Doc looked at his companion as if he thought Tommy was bereft of his senses.

"Then why in tarnation," he yelled, "are we hurtling through the purple dusk of twilight this way?"

Doc Baldwin's face lost some of its perpetual good nature as Tommy went into his narrative, starting with the RTTY message about the missing cruiser *Skipalong* in the sheriff's office and winding up with his deciphering the mystery message for Tug Weldon.

By the time he had finished, they were at the highway. Here on the open road, Jigger O'Dell was showing no sign of speeding up the Porsche, even though the speed limit was not rigidly enforced outside the city. Tommy dared not get closer than a block behind the sports car, for fear Tug Weldon might happen to look around and recognize his old car.

They were past the San Marcos clover leaf and the General Hospital grounds, a mile out of Santa Bonita, before Doc Baldwin ventured to comment on his buddy's fantastic recital.

"I think," he said, "you're letting your imagination get the best

of you, Tommy. Weldon said O'Dell had to pick up a part at a ship chandler's. Well, maybe they are."

"Know of any ship chandlers this far out of town? The only one in Santa Bonita is at Ed Moran's shop, not five minutes from the wharf."

"Yeah," Doc Baldwin mumbled, relapsing into silence.

They were abreast of the KTMS radio towers five miles out of town when Doc thought of something else. "You keep a copy of this mystery message you copied?"

Tommy shook his head, keeping his eyes focused on the twin taillights of the Porsche. "Weldon snatched it out of my hand and rushed out to show it to Jigger O'Dell. Right then I was sure I'd let them sucker me into something."

"And what did this message say? I assume it is emblazoned in letters of fire on your brain?"

"I told you. It started out with 'twelve twenty eighteen fifteen,' and then it was followed by what must have been latitude and longitude bearings, judging from the way Weldon and O'Dell were poring over that road map."

Doc's face was a study of concentration in the soft glow of the dashboard lights.

"Twelve twenty obviously refers to a calendar date," he said. "December twentieth."

"Which is today," Tommy agreed. "That's what disturbed Weldon, it being today. And eighteen fifteen, of course, is the military way of telling time in the twenty-four-hour system, the same as we do in our radio logs."

Doc nodded approvingly. "Sure, that's got to be it. And eighteen fifteen would be. . . pardon me while I take off my shoes to count my toes. . .that would be six fifteen. It is now five fifteen or thereabouts."

Tommy had to pull over to the slow lane to avoid a stack-up of traffic which was turning off at the Skyport Drive-In Theater on the outskirts of Goleta, the college suburb seven miles north of Santa Bonita.

When that slow-down was behind them, they had an anxious moment thinking the red Porsche had turned off the highway, until, topping a low hill black with citrus, they recognized the peculiar orange-red tail lights of the German car, cruising along at a consistent speed.

"Whatever's going to happen," Tommy commented, "is going

to happen at six fifteen. And about twenty miles out of town. That would put it this side of Gaviota Pass quite a ways."

Both boys lapsed into thoughtful silence, senses dulled by the sedative drone of tires over concrete, the deep-throated purr of the dual-carbureted engine.

Tommy was glad he didn't have any curfew for getting home tonight. His folks, vacationing in Hawaii, were not due back until next Wednesday, which was Christmas Day. His foremost worry at the moment was his gasoline gauge. It registered three gallons when it was on the "E" mark, where the needle rested now, and that was good for about fifty miles. And there weren't many filling stations on this lonely stretch of the coast highway.

"I still wish," Doc complained, "you'd let me fire up the old wireless and let the sheriff or the highway patrol or somebody know what we're doing, Thomas."

"And if Weldon's monitoring the police calls on a scanner in his Porsche, which gangsters do, we could catch cold from the breeze blowing through the bullet holes in our windshield, son."

Tommy's eyes watered from the strain of facing the oncoming glare of lights. There was a full moon out, but it was too early for its light to be effective.

The Porsche had stepped up its speed. As they passed the Industrial Park outside of Goleta the speedometer touched seventy for the first time. To the left was the airport, the sprinkle of lights marking the university campus, and the flat, lead-gray line of the Pacific Ocean, tracked by moonlight.

The lofty, rugged mountain range on their right was blue-black, only the peaks tipped with rose gold from the departed sun; they were beginning to enter the Ellwood oil field area. The flashing beacons marking a mountaintop television transmitter identified the landmark known as TV Peak. They were ten miles out of Santa Bonita now; and O'Dell had mentioned something about twenty miles being their destination.

"Just to allay my curiosity," Doc Baldwin said, "what is your theory about what those guys are up to?"

Tommy shrugged. "To quote the QTC I took off the tape, they are bound for latitude F, longitude 8 on a certain map which, I feel safe in assuming, is a map of Santa Barbara County. I think that when O'Dell and Weldon reach that spot, they will find somebody or

something waiting for them. Something connected with the Purple Shirt's smuggling ring."

Doc whistled. "Yipes. We could be headed for serious trouble, kid, if we're tangling with an LA drug syndicate!"

Up ahead, O'Dell's sport car was caught between two tandem-hitched freight trucks. Tommy slowed down.

"Even if this cops and robbers business tonight doesn't get us anywhere," Tommy said, "at least the sheriff will be able to pick up the cabin cruiser. If it turns out to be a stolen job, O'Dell is probably the thief and Weldon the innocent victim."

Both boys saw the Porsche swing out from between the freight trucks and, pouring on speed, hurtle ahead to dip from sight over a low-lying hill spiked with the silhouettes of storage tanks and oil-well derricks. From here on Highway 101 hugged the coastline along rather desolate farming country.

"I'm ready to agree," Doc said, "that Weldon and O'Dell are in cahoots about this radio message and the map business. If they're keeping a rendezvous with smugglers tonight, then we may have seats on the fifty yard line. And that's w—"

Doc was cut off by a sharp, popping sound, like the flat explosion of a rifle. His first thought was that the "mobsters" in the Porsche had opened fire. The next instant he knew by the sickening, fanwise skid of the rear wheels that they were in terrible danger, but not from gangster guns. The left rear tire had blown out.

Tommy's shout to "hang tight, Doc!" was drowned out by the screaming of rubber on concrete as he fought the wheel to counteract the violent, seesaw swerving which hurled them into the opposite traffic lane and back again.

With consummate skill and coordination Tommy maneuvered the lurching vehicle into the outside lane, not daring to touch the brakes; to do so would be fatal at this stage.

The car shuddered and churned up a geyser of dirt and gravel as it skidded onto the soft shoulder of the highway. Doc was vaguely aware that his side of the car was zooming in at an angle against a shale revetment; cushioning ice plant saved their lives there. Momentarily out of control, the car bounced back to the edge of the highway and then, skillfully applying the emergency brake—which was independent of the hydraulic system controlling the wheel brakes—Tommy brought them to a lurching stop on a grassy patch safely off

the road.

Tommy switched off the ignition. Traffic whizzed past with jetlike rushes of sound. The suction of each passing car on the near lane rocked their springs, showered them with dust.

Tommy's locked fingers unfisted from the steering wheel, lifted and fell with a gesture of despair as he stared at the moving tape of traffic flowing over the hill ahead.

His voice sounded unnaturally loud in the vacuum of silence: "Well...that's that. No more cops and robbers for tonight, ladies and gentlemen. No use even tuning in the same time tomorrow. Because we'll never lay eyes on that red Porsche again."

Doc Baldwin recovered his glasses, which a sprig of ice plant had clawed off his head when they scraped the embankment back there.

"It was fun while it lasted," he said shakily. Impulsively Doc reached over to squeeze Tommy's arm. "Thanks for the way you reined down this bucking bronco, kid. Most drivers would have had us turning somersaults into oncoming traffic. We were hitting seventy when that casing blew."

The two boys climbed out of the car and disconsolately set to work jacking up the rear axle, removing the ruined casing and putting on the spare wheel.

There was no longer any need to hurry; they took a leisurely twenty minutes to do the job. Once the red Porsche was out of sight, the chase was hopeless.

They were putting the tools back in the trunk when Tommy suddenly emitted a yelp of anguish.

"How dumb can I get!" he demanded. "I just remembered something. When Jigger was pointing out the spot on that map to Weldon, aboard the cruiser, he said something like 'F and 8 would put it about there, providing Murdock—whoever he is—is still using an auto club map.' "

"So what?" asked Doc, as he saw Tommy start clawing at the contents of his overstuffed glove compartment.

"Look," Tommy said, grabbing a flashlight and shining it on his collection of road maps. "We're not licked yet, kid. Here in Santa Barbara County, there are only two county maps readily available to the public—right?"

"We-ell, I guess so," Doc agreed. "The one the auto club puts out, and the one on the Deakins Van and Storage advertising."

"Okay," Tommy said, shuffling through his collection. "If the Purple Shirt Mob was operating in our county they'd have to use one or the other of those maps. In Weldon's case, they're using an auto club map, because I saw it. I figure all we've got to do is look up this spot marked F and 8 on *my* auto club map of Santa Barbara County, and we know where that Porsche was headed tonight!"

Some of Tommy's excitement reached Doc now. The two boys jerked open an auto club map of the county and put the flashlight beam on it.

"See, the top and bottom borders are numbered from left to right, 1 to 15," Tommy pointed out. "The left and right borders are lettered in eleven equal spaces designated A through K. Now where F and 8 intersect—"

Doc ran a finger along the blue line on the map which indicated Highway 101, skirting the Pacific Ocean. "Your night vision is better than mine, Tommy. Where are we now, do you think?"

Tommy peered out into the night, studying the black outline of the Santa Ynez Mountains in search of identifiable landmarks.

"We're due south of the Santa Ynez Peak fire lookout," he said, "and Refugio Pass turnoff is about a mile ahead of us. We're west of the KEYT television transmitter, and that's seventeen miles airline out of town."

Doc transferred that information to the map. "Then we're practically at the intersection of the F and 8 grid lines now!"

The boys bumped heads in their eagerness to study the details of the map at the point where they believed Tug Weldon and Jigger O'Dell were heading for their six-fifteen rendezvous.

This section of coast was wild and desolate, without farmhouses, service stations, motels or other marks of civilization.

"I've got it!" Tommy exclaimed. "There's only two side roads they could have taken—Refugio Pass, or this little dirt road that goes south off the highway, over an SP grade crossing and down to this dot indicating an abandoned oil well. Let's get goin'!"

Thrusting the road map and flashlight into Doc's lap, Tommy got his car back onto the highway and roaring up and over the crest of the hill where they had had their last glimpse of the Porsche.

"It's a fifty-fifty bet we'll pick the wrong turnoff, either north or south of the highway," Doc said pessimistically.

"But I remember O'Dell said something about there not being

time enough to go by boat, they'd have to take the car," Tommy said excitedly. "That makes it almost positive they're meeting someone or something along the beach. And between 101 and the surf there's only a strip of land a hundred yards wide—"

They spotted the dirt road leading to some oil company's private lease less than a minute after cresting the hill. The road was so obscure they almost missed seeing it at all; as Tommy turned off the highway onto it his headlights gleamed momentarily on a weatherbeaten sign reading SEASIDE OIL Co. WELL #3, 2.4 MI.

Tommy turned off his lights; there was glare enough from 101 traffic to guide him the fifty yards to the crossing of the railroad's main line Coast Route tracks.

Over the tracks, the dirt road, obviously abandoned to judge by the weeds growing between the ruts, dipped down a steep pitch of ground to the level of the grassy bench which extended another fifty yards out to the brink of the shale cliffs overlooking the ocean.

Straight ahead of them, the boys saw the dirt lane end at a cattle guard and padlocked steel gate carrying the oil company's "No Trespassing" sign. Tommy braked to a stop with the front bumper only inches from the gate.

"Well," he said heavily, "we guessed wrong, all right. They must have taken the Refugio Pass road into the mountains. This is dead end."

He was reaching for the light switch when Doc grabbed his arm. "We didn't guess wrong!" Doc hissed in his ear. "Look yonder—to the right of the gate!"

Tommy peered in the direction Doc was pointing—and felt his heart stop beating.

Parked in the deep shade of a clump of eucalyptus saplings, beside the oil company's high wire mesh fence, was Tug Weldon's red Porsche.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The car appeared to be deserted.

Every few seconds, the glare of a passing headlight on Highway 101 would flicker briefly over the scene, glinting on chrome trim and red leather upholstery. O'Dell and Weldon were nowhere in sight.

"Th-think it's safe to prowl around?" whispered Doc. "If those hoods are packing rods—or is it gats?—we could get rubbed out." He chuckled, trying to mask the chattering of his teeth by trying for the laughs. "How d'yuh like my underworld lingo?"

Tommy cranked down the window and stuck his head out, alert to the night sounds. The surf was a booming organ tone which blended with the drone of passing traffic. The breeze was freighted with the rank odors of kelp and salt and pungent eucalyptus.

"Let's get out and reconnoiter," Tommy suggested. "If we can't hear them, it works both ways."

The boys eased the car doors open with infinite stealth and stepped cautiously into the road. The night was not chilly, even for Christmas season, but both of them were shivering. The knee-deep Bermuda grass which carpeted the oil company's leased ground on the ocean side of the fence filled the night with a sinister whispering.

"Let's look over the Porsche," Tommy suggested, making a mental note of the number on the California license tag it carried: GVM068.

Despite the noise of the surf and the highway traffic, Tommy and Doc found themselves holding their breaths as they tiptoed along the rutted adobe road toward the sports car. It had been parked facing

outward, as if poised for a getaway, and its headlights seemed like a pair of eyes watching them, malignant and menacing, something evil crouched to spring.

It helped to shatter the illusion when they laid a hand on the gleaming streamlined fenders, inspected the whip antenna mounted on the cowl of the Porsche. "AM/FM radio only," Doc reported. "So they weren't able to listen in on police calls after all."

Tommy, peering inside the car, found something lying on the red-leather seat. He picked it up and recognized it instantly.

"Doc! Doc!" he whispered excitedly. "This is a loaded ammo clip for an Uzi machine pistol. Just like the ones in Ross Jackson's locker."

This was a real find. Machine pistols of any kind were very, very illegal for anyone outside the military or police.

Doc was twisting the celluloid-windowed registration holder on the steering post. The moon, round and full as a silver dollar in the night sky, enabled Doc to make out the registration data.

"This Porsche isn't Weldon's, anyway!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "It's rented from the Drive-Ur-Own Garage in North Hollywood!"

Tommy answered excitedly, "It all ties in with the Purple Shirt Mob, Doc! Remember how Ross told us that gangsters never run around in stolen cars anymore? They rent from legitimate firms under assumed names, use the car on a job and return it. That way they can't be picked up by the law in some roadblock or dragnet that's after a stolen car."

Doc's discovery that the Porsche was rented explained why they found no personal clues in the glove compartment; only a packet of California road maps, a motel directory, and a "beer can" fire extinguisher.

"What time is it by your watch, Doc?" Tommy asked.

"Six on the nose, synchronized daily with WWV. Gosh, I would have guessed it was at least midnight, wouldn't you?"

Tommy walked over to the steel mesh fence and peered out at the ocean. Westward, about a hundred yards from the parked Porsche, a ravine cut a slot in the cliffs, accounting for the bridges inshore for the railroad and highway.

"Doc," Tommy said thoughtfully, "I've got a hunch Weldon and O'Dell are down at the beach right now. It's only fifteen minutes

away from their eighteen-fifteen deadline the mystery radio message told them about."

Doc gulped. "What do you think's going to happen at eighteen-fifteen hours? A nuclear explosion?"

"I've got it figured this way," Tommy said. "I figure a smuggling boat, maybe piloted by Grote Slankard himself, is going to come in close to this lonely strip of beach and unload a cargo of counterfeit money or narcotics or maybe some illegal aliens. I figure Weldon and O'Dell are down there under the cliffs right now, signaling with a flashlight."

Doc shuddered. "I suggest—in fact, I beg you— to let the air out of this buggy's tires, pour sand in the gas tank, and then hop in your wheels, buzz back to the highway, and radio for the gendarmes to send a riot squad out here to take over."

Tommy thought that over.

"Okay, I'm ready to buy that now," he said. "We can break our radio silence. After all, we've got two concrete clues to go on—the machine-gun clip we found in this Porsche, plus the fact that the cabin cruiser is not only a stolen craft, but known to be tied up with the Purple Shirt Mob in the past. Go ahead and give Santa Bonita a shout on seventy-five, Doc."

"It's your rig—you operate it."

Tommy knelt down and calmly proceeded to wriggle his way under the fence and came to his feet on the opposite side.

"What're you doing?" Doc choked out in alarm.

Tommy whispered back, "While you're trying to get through to town on the wireless, I'm going scouting. I just can't be this close to the beach without finding out if there's a smuggler ship anchored out there."

Doc made a futile grab at Tommy through the fence.

"You'll get yourself sprayed with a machine-gun, crossing that open ground in this moonlight—"

"Think I'm crazy?" Tommy retorted. "I won't make like a bear who walks like a man. I'll be crawling like the cowardly skunk I am." Suddenly he thought of something. "Doc, reach in the glove compartment and pass me my binoculars. If I see anything off shore—"

Doc hurried back to the car and returned with the glasses.

"I'll be right back," Tommy said, slinging the neckstrap of the binoculars over his shoulder. "You fire up the rig and—hey, Doc.

Look here!"

Tommy was down on his knees in the soft, powdery dirt of the fire break which had been plowed for a ten-foot-wide strip just inside the oil company's fence line. There had been a dry spell, and as a result, anyone walking on the plowed firebreak left distinct footprints behind.

Doc, turning back to the fence, saw Tommy pointing at two very clear sets of footprints—one smooth, box-toed and narrow, the other heavily corrugated, with an ace of spades design in the heel. The two sets of prints lead off and away across the plowed strip in the direction of the drainage ravine leading through a break in the cliffs to the beach.

"That's where Weldon and O'Dell climbed over and headed for the barranca," Tommy whispered excitedly. "I even know which was which—O'Dell was wearing the rubber-soled sneakers, Weldon the box-toed sandals. They'll be easy as following a sidewalk—"

As if reading his pal's thoughts, Tommy went on, "They've gone down to the water's edge, you can bet a blown chip on that."

"And," spoke up Doc, "you can bet a kilowatt bottle that Dr. Nils Baldwin's favorite son isn't going to track 'em anywhere."

Remembering the machine-gun clip he had found, Tommy lost his own impulse for making like a bloodhound. He peered at his watch: ten after six.

"Time's getting short, Doc," Tommy said. "I've got box seats waiting for this show to ring up a six-fifteen curtain. Get the rig warmed up. I'll be back in a flash with whatever I find out."

Instead of following the plain tracks toward the ravine, Tommy cut straight across the firebreak strip and, getting down on hands and knees, crawled out of sight into the Bermuda grass.

When he had come within a dozen feet of the cliff's edge he lowered himself to his stomach and crawled snakelike to where the grass gave way to empty space and the land fell away sheer to a narrow ribbon of gravelly beach some twenty feet below.

Disappointment stabbed Tommy as he scanned the black, shining sea which stretched out from the beach toward the Channel Islands of Santa Rosa and San Miguel, remote and mysterious on the horizon some thirty miles out to sea.

No ominous-looking smugglers' boat lay at anchor outside the creaming rows of phosphorescent breakers. A wide, spreading moonglade gilded the sea with diamond-points as far as Tommy's eyes

could reach, but no craft of any kind moved across that glittering path.

Most of the shoreline between Santa Bonita and the rocky promontory of Point Concepcion consisted of low, broken cliffs with the breakers, even at low tide, crashing against the rocks at their feet.

At this spot on the coast, however, an alluvial fan had been thrust out by the waters of the creek which had cut the ravine to Tommy's right. The action of the tides had thrown up a sickle of gravelly beach which, at low tide, was perhaps a hundred feet wide and stretched up and down the shore for a quarter mile in either direction.

In the moon's pale witchglow, and with the help of the binoculars, Tommy could pick out every spray-shiny rock, sandbar and piled-up windrows of seaweed along that entire strip of beach. Of one thing he was sure: Tug Weldon and Jigger O'Dell were not walking those sands anywhere.

A puffing, crawling noise immediately behind him put sharp panic into Tommy. He had been concentrating so hard on locating a smuggler boat out at sea, he had been careless about watching his rear. And now someone was sneaking up on him!

He jerked around, fully expecting to find himself looking into the bore of a machine pistol held by Tug Weldon or O'Dell. Instead, Doc Baldwin's moon face, pale as chalk, came slithering jerkily out of the Bermuda grass thicket.

"Can't turn the radio gear on—you've got the ignition key with you," Doc wheezed. He had obviously come on this side of the fence very much against his better judgment.

Tommy fumbled in his jeans and drew out his key ring, handing it over to Doc with a whispered "Sorry." He had purposely wired his mobile transceiver so it wouldn't operate unless the ignition key was in place; he had to, to keep high school busybodies from turning his gear on and running down the battery.

"See anything?" Doc panted, putting the keys in his sweater pocket and peering apprehensively at the placid ocean, almost glass-smooth between the outer breakers and the dark brown acres of floating kelp beds.

Tommy shook his head gloomily and handed Doc the glasses.

"No boat, no smugglers. No Weldon and O'Dell, either. And the zero hour is at hand... Better edge back a ways. We know those guys are down there somewhere. Wouldn't do to let the moon flash on the lenses of those binocs and betray us."

Doc handed the glasses back to Tommy as if they were red hot.

"Maybe," he suggested, "The Purple Shirt Mob works with a submarine...Come on, kid. Let's get back to the car."

"Five more minutes," Tommy insisted.

Doc settled down to wait, preferring to stay on the cliff's brink with Tommy than to return to the car alone.

The boys waited in breath-held suspense, listening to the ceaseless drumming of the surf, the whining of tires on the highway.

"I messed up, that's for sure," Tommy whispered. "We shouldn't have brought our car over on this side of the tracks. Now, if O'Dell and Weldon should get back to the Porsche first, they'll spot our car and know they were tailed out of town."

An abysmal moan escaped Doc's lips. "Let's scram," he begged. "Maybe they went clamming. Maybe there's a grunion run on tonight and they love seafood. Maybe—"

Tommy reached out to clamp a palm over Doc's mouth.

"Listen!" he hissed. "I hear something. Somebody walking on rocks—"

It was true. Above the normal nocturnal sounds—the traffic, the surf, the wind in the roundabout grass, the occasional squawk of a night fowl—they caught the unmistakable sound of someone walking over loose rocks, seemingly directly below them.

Sweat oozed from Tommy Rockford's pores as he sank his hooked fingers into the grass roots and hauled himself forward inch by inch until his chin overhung the lip of the cliff.

Directly below, a man carrying a fishing rod and a lighted gas lantern was picking his way out onto the beach toward the wet sand. He wore hip boots and a fisherman's sou'wester; he was so near that the boys could hear the rustle of the oilskins.

A dozen feet from the base of the cliff, the man set his lantern down on a flat rock and proceeded to sink a patented fork-shaped contraption into the sand—a gadget Tommy recognized as a holder for a fishing rod, much used by surf casters on the California beaches.

"Who's he?" Doc's whisper sounded in Tommy's ear. "O'Dell? Or Weldon?"

Tommy shook his head. "Neither one. Just a fisherman out for a little moonlight surf casting, I guess. No wonder O'Dell and Weldon haven't shown themselves. They're probably hiding in the ravine, afraid to let this fisherman spot 'em."

The boys caught a glimpse of the fisherman's profile as he squatted down beside the lantern and proceeded to attach a snag-gang to the end of his line—a nylon cord on which, every few inches, was spaced a cluster of unbaited fishhooks.

"Wait-a-minute!" Tommy said in a tense whisper. "That fisherman is up to something fishy, kid. Nobody uses snagging hooks for surf fishing. And what's the lantern for, on a bright night like this?"

Doc's teeth chattered together. "Maybe—he's a smuggler—using that lantern to signal—a ship at sea—"

Tommy felt his heart slug his ribs. "Then where do O'Dell and Weldon fit the picture?"

Before Doc could think up an answer for that one, a shift in the wind brought to their ears a new, frightening sound—the throbbing roar of an airplane. It came from the west, a distinctive, pulsating drone of sound which in no way resembled the chuffing din of diesel-truck stacks on the busy highway at their backs.

"Tommy—look! Straight down the shore—like twin stars—"

Doc's excited whisper brought Tommy around. Something was moving—something that looked like twin stars, low in the west—but below the level of the horizon, so they couldn't be stars.

Tommy whipped his 8 × 50 binoculars to his eyes, focusing them on the moving white dots. Silhouetted against the faint ribbon of lingering sun-down color on the western horizon he made out a low-flying, low-wing monoplane equipped with pontoons.

"It's a two-engine seaplane, headed straight at us," Tommy whispered, "not more than twenty feet above the water—"

The aircraft was still half a mile away, its motor noise lost now as the wind shifted. Lowering the glasses, Tommy took a quick side look to the beach to check up on the mysterious fisherman. And what he saw made him forget the plane for the moment.

The fisherman's casting rod lay on the sand; but the man had picked up the gas lantern and was swinging it in lazy horizontal figure eights, facing the west.

"He's signaling that plane, Doc!" Tommy whispered in a frenzy of excitement. "There's your smuggler contact for eighteen fifteen!"

"An air-drop of contraband, just like the Purple Shirt Mob operates!" Doc gasped, too excited to remember he was scared.

Tommy lifted his glasses again. The plane was so close now, skimming the beach at perhaps sixty miles an hour, that even Doc Baldwin

could see the moonlight shimmering on its twin pontoons and lemon-yellow fuselage.

Both boys saw the two landing lights on the leading edge of the wing wink on and off, on and off, as if in reply to the fisherman's lantern signals.

Keeping the plane focused in the circular field of the prism binoculars, Tommy picked out thrilling details. The pilot's silhouette in the plexiglass bubble over the cockpit, the blur of moonshine on the spinning propeller blades, the struts of the boatlike pontoons jutting down so close to the ocean that the spray seemed to touch them.

"He's going to make a sea landing—right here, Tommy!"

But Doc was wrong. When the plane was almost directly abreast of them, its motors jolting their eardrums, the pilot gunned the ship into a steep climbing turn toward the open sea.

The action was too fast for Tommy to catch in the binoculars, but he lowered the glasses in time to see the pilot toss something from the side window of the cabin—an object to which a tiny red light was attached.

Both boys saw the seaplane bank away into the night like a soaring gull, its motor exhaust making their ears hurt. The object which the pilot had tossed out made its slanting flight downward and hit the ocean some fifty yards out from shore with a geysering, quicksilver splash.

Seconds later, the tiny red light bobbed into view, riding the floating object. The drone of the plane died away in the distance. It had vanished in the cobalt sky.

The fisherman waved his lantern in a circular pattern and then blew it out. He turned to pick up his fishing rod now. Out on the oily surface of the ocean, the object which Tommy now identified as a floating metal canister with a red electric lamp on its top lid was bobbing up and down like a cork.

Doc's shoulder nudged Tommy's. "Did you. . . see any numbers . . . on that plane's tail? I didn't."

"No. Watch the fisherman. He's going to use his fishline to snag that floating thing and reel it in."

The man in the black slicker drew his rod back, lashed it out expertly, and sent his invisible line hissing out over the waves, obviously in an effort to—

"Drop the rod, Murdock. We'll take over now."

The voice was Tug Weldon's, and it came in a rumbling shout from the base of the cliff directly below. And in that same instant Tommy and Doc caught sight of Tug Weldon and Jigger O'Dell moving into the moonlight, like hunters stalking the lone fisherman. In O'Dell's grasp was an Uzi machine pistol, leveled at the fisherman's chest.

CHAPTER NINE

Tommy and Doc, lying side by side on the grassy cliff edge, saw Murdock lift his arms and turn to face the two gangsters who had sneaked up on him. They heard his cynical voice defying them: "So. Is this a double cross? A hijacking?"

O'Dell and Weldon halted in front of Murdock, guns leveled.

"Hijacking is a nasty phrase, Murdock," Weldon protested slurringly. "Let's say O'Dell and I decided to go into partnership with you and Grote. Just for two or three hauls, say. That would net us enough to retire from the racket."

The fisherman laughed disdainfully.

"Just how long do you think you cheap hoods will last? I can imagine a punchdrunk goon like Jigger trying a stunt like this, Tug, but you're an educated man, our syndicate bookkeeper. I gave you credit for better sense."

It was hard for Tommy and Doc not to feel a grudging admiration for the way Murdock was facing up to these gunmen. They knew this "fisherman" was in reality the Purple Shirt contraband runner which the mob had planted in Santa Barbara County to pick up smuggler shipments.

"Stand still," Weldon ordered. "I'm going to frisk you."

Weldon moved in on Murdock with obvious reluctance, searching him quickly for concealed weapons. He took an ugly .45 automatic from a shoulder harness under Murdock's oilskin slicker.

O'Dell stood by, machine pistol ready.

"He's clean now, Jigger," Weldon said, stepping away. "Murdock, snag that can of coke and reel it in. Just play your cards right tonight,

Murdock my friend, and you'll walk away to live another day."

Murdock lowered his arms, shrugged, and stooped to pick up the casting rod. Tommy Rockford's heart did a flip-flop as he suddenly remembered the meaning of that word "coke."

That canister floating in the surf was loaded with cocaine!

Murdock, reeling in his fishhook gang, squinted out to sea and picked up the bobbing red pilot light on the canister.

Then, without warning, Murdock lifted his right knee and smashed the fishing rod in two places. A sardonic laugh blew from the smuggler's lips as he tossed the wreckage of the rod at Tug Weldon's feet.

"You aim to burn me anyway," he said bitterly. "Why should I reel in that loot for you? You'll have a long cold wait or a long cold wade before you lay hands on that coke, Tug."

O'Dell and Weldon turned to each other, cursing angrily. Murdock, expecting to die anyway, had made it impossible for his captors to recover their swag the easy way.

"Take him back to the car and tie him up, Jigger!" Weldon ordered finally. "The tide's still coming in. Slackwater isn't till nine. That coke won't float out to sea. We can afford to wait for it to come into wading distance."

O'Dell lifted his machine pistol threateningly and headed toward Murdock, snarling something the boys on the high bank could not make out above the crashing thunder of a particularly heavy breaker. But they saw Tug Weldon step in to shove O'Dell to one side, and they heard the dapper gunman's rebuke: "No, you can't handle Murdock like you would a two-bit punk, Jigger. Not having any real guts yourself, you don't recognize courage in a real man."

Weldon turned to Murdock, who was calmly lighting a cigarette.

"Murdock," Weldon said, "you're not going to be rubbed out. Not if you play your cards right... That was Grote Slankard in the plane tonight, right?"

Murdock blew a raveled-out string of smoke into the moonlight.

"Who else?"

"You're wondering how Jigger and I knew about this drop in time to come up from LA and hijack it, aren't you?"

Murdock said, "That angle of this set-up puzzles me, yes. I know Grote wouldn't double-cross me."

O'Dell said angrily, "What are we stallin' for? I say we ought to make Murdock swim out for that can of coke or drown tryin'."

"Shut up!" Weldon ordered his henchman. "Look, Murdock. We're hijacking this drop tonight, and we'll hijack the next one—the counterfeit stuff we know Slankard's going to be dropping somewhere in Santa Barbara County during Christmas week."

Tommy whispered to Doc, "Don't miss any of this, kid. We have to make sure Ross—"

"Shh," Doc nudged his pal.

Murdock was saying, "Being Grote's bookkeeper, you'd know when he was going to make a drop, sure. It's *where* he's going to make it that's going to stop you, Tug." Murdock flipped his burning cigarette stub squarely at Jigger O'Dell's glowering face. "And it won't do Jigger any good to give me the old torture treatment, either, because even *I* have no idea where or when Grote is planning to drop that counterfeit shipment. Not yet."

Weldon stared at the blue automatic in his hand. 'Sure, sure. Grote will be radioing the rendezvous point to you sometime between now and Tuesday. He has no way of knowing we moved in on his pick-up tonight, does he, Murdock? No. I'm afraid, Murdock, you're going to lead me and Jigger to your hidden transmitter tonight. And we'll be holding a gun in your ribs when Grote makes his next radio contact with you..."

Murdock said, "You've got it all figured out, haven't you? You two small timers got tired of being pushers and fences, decided you wanted a bigger cut. Well, you won't last, Tug. The racket's too big for a crummy hood like you."

Jigger O'Dell was pacing impatiently up and down the sand, watching the floating can out in the breakers. So far as Doc and Tommy could tell, it hadn't floated one inch closer to shore.

"I'll take Murdock to the car," O'Dell suggested, "while you wait here, Tug, and keep an eye on that red light out there. If the battery should peter out before it floats ashore we might never locate the stuff."

Weldon nodded. "Okay, Jigger. I figure the tide will shove it on the beach by nine o'clock at the latest. And remember, now—no rough stuff on Murdock. He's worth a million bucks to us alive and not a wooden nickel as a stiff. So no rough stuff."

O'Dell muttered profanely and moved up to prod Murdock in the back with his machine pistol. Murdock started walking up the beach toward the ravine trail, leaving Weldon behind to keep his eye on the

bobbing ruby spark in the outer row of breakers.

"Doc," Tommy breathed into his friend's ear, "we've seen enough. Let's cut out!"

The two boys backed off from the edge of the cliff into the knee-deep grass. When they were out of Weldon's view they came to their feet, knowing it was safe enough now.

"What's next on the agenda?" Doc asked hoarsely, as they sprinted through the heavy grass.

"Get the car back out of sight across the highway," Tommy answered, "and put an emergency CQ on the air, get some ham to alert the sheriff's office. Shouldn't be hard, with the Channel Cities Net having its nightly ragchew about now."

They were both in the pink of condition from the recently concluded football season, and both hit the plowed firebreak strip as if it were touchdown territory. A moment later they were scaling the steel gate and dropping down alongside their car.

Scrambling into the car, Doc inquired, "Suppose the Porsche pulls out of this side road before Ross Jackson can get a prowl car up here? Don't forget we're twenty miles out of town."

Tommy stowed his binoculars in the glove compartment and began probing his pockets for his keys.

"I think we'll have oceans of time," he said. "They won't leave before they've picked up that can of drugs, and with the tide not changing until nine—hey, I forgot—I gave you the keys. Fork 'em over."

Doc made clawing motions at the pocket of his K6CRJ sweater. Then be began scratching at the pockets of his jeans. Finally a sound like gas escaping from a punctured balloon issued from Doc's lips.

"Tommy—I—I—the keys are lost. They must have dropped out while we were running across that field—"

Tommy wasted no time in argument or recrimination. He yanked at the door, crying, "Then we'll have to bypass the ignition switch, because I haven't got an extra key."

The boys leaped from the car from opposite sides and faced each other a moment later across the engine.

"Got a pair of diagonal pliers on you, Doc?" Tommy asked. "We'll have to clip one of the headlight leads for a jumper—"

A sound of voices reached them coming from the direction of the nearby eucalyptus clump.

Jerking around, the boys saw O'Dell and his prisoner, Murdock,

walking along the fence near the parked Porsche.

Pure terror struck the pair. There was no time to get the car started now. O'Dell could cut them in two at the hips with one burst from that deadly "typewriter" gun.

"Let's go, Doc!" hissed Tommy. "Six-eleven-ten-*hike*!"

Swiveling like football backs on a spinner play, Doc and Tommy went tearing off the moonlit road as if headed for the end zone. They heard O'Dell's startled yell behind them, as the gangster heard the clatter of their feet on the hard adobe.

With Murdock to guard, O'Dell could hardly give chase; but the machine pistol could probably carry half a mile and that knowledge alone made the boys redouble their speed and hurtle up and over the Southern Pacific tracks like a pair of antelope.

"We're safe, kid—" yelled Doc. "Touchdown!"

Doc Baldwin had bragged too soon. His foot caught on an unseen obstacle in the weeds just off the cinder apron of the roadbed and he fell sprawling.

Tommy, racing back to help Doc to his feet, thus had time to check a headlong flight which, otherwise, would probably have taken them clear across the four lanes of Highway 101.

Doc was gasping like a landed fish. "Let's—flag down a passing car—and keep goin'—"

But by now, Tommy Rockford had had time to recover from his momentary panic.

"No, Doc. Safest place for us right now is under that railroad trestle. We can see what O'Dell's doing and he can't see us. Come on."

Without waiting for Doc's reaction, Tommy sprinted along the north side of the track until he came to the gully. Scrambling down through the zigzag of creosoted trestle timbers, he finally crouched behind a concealing clump of prickly pear cactus which opened on a view of his car, the parked Porsche, the fence and the stretch of grassland extending out to the cliff edge.

Jigger O'Dell and Murdock were standing at the locked gate, staring at the trails the two boys had made in the Bermuda grass, coming and going. That "M" shaped set of tracks told a clear story of two persons wriggling under the fence, walking to the edge of the cliff, and returning to the fence.

O'Dell, apparently, had seen enough; he knew that Murdock's capture had been witnessed. Pointing his machine pistol at the ground,

he triggered three short bursts.

The echoes of the triple signal volleyed off into distance and were lost in the emptiness of the night. A moment later Tommy heard O'Dell's signal answered by the muffled report of Weldon's pistol, from down on the beach.

At that moment Doc Baldwin came scrambling up behind Tommy.

"What's all the shootin'?"

"O'Dell spotted our tracks and is pulling out. He's signaling Weldon in from left field."

The two boys, crouched in the shadows of the railway trestle, saw Weldon thrust his gun muzzle up to the padlock on the gate and pull the trigger; the weapon jolted against the crook of his arm like a pavement worker's air hammer. The slugs shattered the lock and O'Dell kicked the oil company's gate open, gesturing with the gun for Murdock to come through ahead of him.

Doc and Tommy lost sight of the two gangsters as they entered the blot of shadow under the eucalyptus bosque. A few moments later they saw O'Dell emerge into the moonlight again, alone.

"D'you suppose—he killed Murdock?" Doc's quavering voice sounded as if he was close to being sick.

"Probably knocked him out and dumped him in the Porsche," Tommy said. "You heard what Weldon said about no rough stuff where Murdock was concerned. They've got their mind set on hijacking another—hey, what's O'Dell doing to my car?"

Tommy felt his stomach muscles contract as he saw O'Dell calmly level his machine pistol at the exposed radiator of the car and riddle it with a spurt of slugs.

Then, slipping another loaded clip into the Uzi, O'Dell blasted both front tires.

Doc Baldwin groaned. "He's making sure we don't drive back to town in your heap. You any idea what a new radiator will cost?"

Tommy, crouching helplessly, felt a cold lump form in his throat while the gangster stalked to the rear of his car and, grabbing Tommy's magnificent new all-band vertical antenna, wrenched and twisted at the gleaming chromium whip until it was bent like a pretzel and torn completely loose from its mount.

"He's doing that to keep us from putting a signal on the air," Tommy growled through locked teeth. "Has more brains than I figured. Shows he respects ham radio, Doc."

At that moment Tug Weldon came limping up the opposite side of the fence, blue-steel automatic glinting in his fist. Coming through the open gate, he caught his first sign of Tommy's car.

"What's wrong? Whose car—"

O'Dell at this moment was climbing into Tommy's car.

"Take a look at that auto license," snarled O'Dell, "and you'll figure out what's wrong. Your ham radio friend followed us out from town tonight and saw us put the snatch on Murdock. And he wasn't alone, he had somebody with him. The two of 'em just hightailed it for 101."

Crashing noises inside the car told Tommy and Doc the worst: O'Dell was smashing the radio equipment to bits.

Weldon, squeezing through the gate, said angrily, "What'd you do with Murdock—?"

"Relax," O'Dell said, climbing out of Tommy's car. "I conked him behind the ear, put him out like a light. Let's get out of here."

Weldon screeched, "But I didn't get the coke out of the surf—when I heard you shoot three times I—"

"Forget the coke. We got to get out of here. For all we know those two kids might have already called the cops by radio."

The two gangsters vanished into the shadows where the red Porsche was parked. A moment later they heard doors slam, and the sweet, rhythmic purr of a high-powered engine.

"And to think," Tommy moaned under his breath, "we had a chance to let the air out of their tires—"

"Thank heavens you didn't," Doc quavered.

With a blur of chrome and red enamel, the sports car zoomed out of the shadows. The boys saw that O'Dell was once more at the wheel, with Murdock slumped in the middle of the single seat, obviously unconscious.

The Porsche streaked up the curving dirt road and over the railroad tracks. Tommy and Doc scrambled back to the north side of the trestle with all possible haste, but were barely in time to see the car speed out onto the highway and turn right, in the direction of Santa Bonita.

Tommy Rockford whooped triumphantly. "That's a break. They're probably heading for the cabin cruiser at the wharf, to make their getaway. We'll trap 'em yet, Doc! By radio!"

Doc slogged after his speedier companion as Tommy recrossed

the Southern Pacific tracks and sprawled his way down the embankment to where his sabotaged car stood.

One look at the shattered wreckage of his homemade mobile transceiver told him that Jigger O'Dell had made sure this gear would never put another RF signal on the air. The car floor was littered with a twisted tangle of capacitors, resistors, ICs, smashed knobs.

Tommy was busy checking the cigar-lighter socket on the front panel, making sure the battery was still working, when Doc Baldwin joined him.

"No damage to the twelve-volt system—O'Dell didn't rip out the power leads to the cigar lighter," Tommy announced happily. "I figure we'll be on the air in another minute."

Doc reached under the steering wheel and picked up the fractured plastic case of what had been Tommy's microphone. "Are you kiddin'? Not with this rig, you won't."

Tommy yelled impatiently, "Your Ten-Tec two-meter job, stupid! O'Dell didn't look in the glove compartment."

Doc Baldwin's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. Ah, yes! His two-meter transceiver, the neatest little hand-held radio station in the world. At home it operated from the 120-volt house current power supply; but by changing cords, the Ten-Tec could be plugged into the cigar lighter of a car and operated from an automobile 12-volt system. And best of all, it did not require a complicated antenna, such as the HF job which O'Dell had just wrecked beyond repair. On two meters, a nineteen-inch whip could get out like a million dollars—

A moment later Doc was opening the door of the glove compartment and pulling out the black vinyl pocket-sized case which held the two-meter FM radio. He paused a moment to fasten a nineteen-inch whip antenna into the twist-lock connector on the top. This was the tiny antenna which, from a tuna clipper ten miles off shore this afternoon had worked a Civil Air Patrol operator more than a hundred miles away.

Grabbing the Ten-Tec from the glove compartment, Doc placed it on the seat. Tommy quickly plugged the power cord into the cigar-lighter socket. Doc turned on the switch, lighting up the receiver dial and making the liquid-crystal readout display the operating frequency.

Nerves snapping with suspense, the two boys waited. They knew the regular Friday night ragchewing session of the Channel Cities Net was in progress at this moment. The "CCN" was a message-relaying

network of two-meter ham stations extending from Santa Maria on the north to Burbank on the south, with perhaps thirty hams joining in the regular Friday night gabfest.

Suddenly the built-in speaker on the Ten-Tec cleared its throat and MacCormack's familiar voice spoke into the night: "...so this guy says, 'What, you don't know what a hydromatic polecat is? It's a shiftless skunk.' And the other guy says, 'Well did you know that a fractured ceramic is a crack-pot?' Hawww... Well, who do I turn it to next, gang? Lance Phillips, I guess—"

Doc groaned, "Imagine cracking wise at a time like this. Is that all Roy's got to do, think up tired old wisecracks—"

Tommy said, "I'll give 'em a shout on the freq before Roy turns it over to Phillips in Hope Ranch. We ought to be able to access the repeater from here, even with a spike. Here goes—"

Tommy Rockford thumbed the push-to-talk button and said "K6ATX with an emergency," praying that his voice would be heard before another operator in the roundtable began talking.

Tommy switched back to "receive," in time to hear the repeater's automatic CW identification during the pause in the conversation. The next few seconds would tell the tale. Had their desperate emergency call been heard?

CHAPTER TEN

Lance Phillips' drawling, easy-going voice issued from the loudspeaker, "Okay, Roy fine, and good evening to the net... This is William 6 George Henry... I heard an emergency call, so let's QRX and have a listen, boys. Standing by for the emergency. Go ahead—"

Doc thrust the microphone into Tommy's hands, too choked-up to talk. Tommy Rockford sucked in a deep breath to steady his nerves, pressed the push-to-talk switch, and said, "W6GH and the Channel Cities Net, this is K6ATX, operating portable about twenty miles north of Santa Bonita. This is an urgent emergency, repeat, emergency. Do you copy us okay, Lance?"

After what seemed like an eternity to Doc and Tommy—although the delay was probably the time it took easy-going Lance Phillips to light his pipe in his hamshack—W6GH returned: "Sure do copy, Tommy, solid five by nine, ten dB over. Hope nothing serious has happened to you. Go ahead K6ATX."

Tommy and Doc felt like shouting their relief. A "five by nine" report meant their signal was getting out loud and clear tonight, even with a nineteen-inch antenna.

"Listen, Lance. I can't go into details, but I want you to phone patch me through to Sheriff Jackson's office right away. Okay?"

Lance Phillips was a real "OT"—an Old Timer in ham radio—with fifty years' experience. He was one of the many hams in Santa Bonita who had the phone-patch equipment needed to hook up an ordinary telephone to a radio transmitter, enabling any third party to talk over the air from his own home.

"Can do," Lance Phillips came back. "I'm ringing the sheriff's office now. You haven't been in an auto accident, I hope?"

"No," Tommy reassured the net. "Doc Baldwin and I are using his Ten-Tec. We'll stand by now."

"Roger." Phillips, whose station was situated in the exclusive residential suburb of Santa Bonita known as Hope Ranch Park, asked the net stations to hold the frequency open. Tommy, realizing that dozens of curious hams were listening in on the Channel Cities hookup right now, muttered to Doc, "I'm glad that receiver in Weldon's Porsche can't pick up any of our VHF signals. As it is I can't tell Ross exactly what happened—"

"Why not?" Doc asked.

"Because for all we know, the Purple Shirt Mob might be monitoring the band. Or even Grote Slankard, in his plane. I—"

Lance Phillips' voice interrupted him: "Sheriff's office? Deputy Olson? Hi, Walt. Say, is Ross Jackson there?...Fine business..." Then W6GH's voice came louder as he turned to his microphone to say to Tommy, "We're lucky, Tommy—the sheriff is still at the courthouse. QRX one."

Tommy and Doc heard the humming of the land telephone line, switchboard clicks, and then a deep voice they knew so well: "Sheriff Jackson speaking."

"Ross, this is Lance Phillips, W6GH. I'm in emergency QSO with Tommy Rockford, who's operating Doc Baldwin's two-meter handheld rig somewhere up the coast. Go ahead, Tommy. You're through to the sheriff on the patch."

"Is anything wrong, Tommy?" came the sheriff's anxious voice.

Tommy pushed the button to the transmit position. "Plenty is wrong, Ross, but Doc and I are personally okay. Let me know if you copy okay; otherwise I'll have Lance relay. Go ahead."

"Copy you five by six, Tommy," Ross said. "Crank up the gain just a trifle, Lance, and switch on your noise limiter."

They were in solid contact now, Ross Jackson in his office in the Santa Bonita courthouse, Tommy Rockford hovering over a 15-ounce package of electronics gear perched on the seat of his wrecked car, twenty miles away.

"Ross," Tommy spoke clearly and slowly, "set up roadblocks at the Hollister Wye, at San Marcos Pass, and anywhere else south of Goleta, right away. Tell your men to intercept a wine-red Porsche

open convertible, California license Golf"—Tommy paused to search his memory a moment—"Golf Victor Mike Zero Six Eight, I repeat GVM068, three men aboard, headed south, two of them armed. Do you copy?"

In his Hope Ranch Park hamshack, Lance Phillips threw a switch. At the courthouse, Sheriff Jackson spoke crisply into his telephone handset: "Roger a hundred per cent, red Porsche, California license GVM068 southbound. Why the roadblocks? Reckless driver?"

"Worse than that," Tommy said. "Can't go into details over the air; explain later. Stand by while you get ball rolling, over."

"Roger," the sheriff came back. "Stand by, W6GH."

The telephone line hum went dead. The boys could hear the raspy, nervous breathing of Lance Phillips, standing by his radio. They heard him clear his throat and address the listening network, "Please keep the frequency clear, fellows. Those of you able to copy K6ATX realize this is an emergency of some kind."

Doc whispered tensely, "That part about the men being armed was an inspiration, kid. Tips off Ross this is serious business, not just a hit-and-run or something."

Five minutes later the sheriff was back: "Roadblocks being set up at all key points. Anything else?"

Tommy wished his heart would slow down. His pulse was like a tom-tom beating in his ears.

He said, "I'll have to sort of talk in riddles, Ross, but this is important. Get a man down to the wharf to keep watch on a forty-foot cabin cruiser tied to the inshore side of the float at Norm's Landing. Name, and I spell, E-Y-E eye, D-U-L-L dull, O-U-R our, Eye-Dull-Our. Copy?"

"Roger a hundred per cent. Can you clue me on whether this is a Coast Guard case?"

Tommy bit his lip, thinking that over. "It might be, at that. Listen close, now. Remember I was in the teletype room this afternoon, and an all-points bulletin came in for your waterfront squad? Remember that?"

A note of excitement entered the usually imperturbable voice of the Santa Bonita sheriff: "Ro-ger! Any connection?"

"One and the same boat, name altered."

After a pause, the sheriff came back: "Are these things connected—the boat and the three men in the red Porsche?"

"Roger," Tommy said. "Very much so. The men go with the boat. I'll stand by while you take care of that wharf business, and then please come back for item three, huh? Over."

Ross Jackson said, "I'm way ahead of you, Tommy. Jimmy Webster's already on his way to the wharf. Ready for item three."

"Fine business, Ross," Tommy said. "My car has been wrecked, just east of the Refugio Pass turnoff on Highway 101. Doc and I are not injured, repeat, not injured, but could you send a tow truck up for us?"

Ross Jackson said carefully, "Is your auto accident in any way connected with all this other business, the Porsche and the cabin cruiser?"

Tommy croaked out a taut laugh. "And how! That's Charlie, that's correct."

The sheriff said briskly, "I'll come up myself, practically on my way now. Thanks, Lance, for the relay service. Must have kept you throwing switches like crazy. You'll flag me down from the side of the highway, Tommy?"

"Will do, Ross. And to the Channel Cities gang, thanks a million for the use of the freq, thanks to you, Lance, and right now we're going to QRT to save the battery. This is K6ATX portable, twenty miles north of Santa Bonita, signing over off and clear."

Then Lance Phillips' lackadaisical "Seventy-three, Tommy," terminated the contact—the most important contact Tommy had ever made during his five years on the air. Although he talked regularly to such distant points as Australia and South Africa and Greenland with his HW-5400 rig, he knew that this twenty-mile QSO tonight would probably stand out as the most thrilling radio communication of his whole life.

Doc and Tommy grabbed each other and went into an exultant snakedance around the bullet-riddled car, knowing that even at this moment the machinery of the sheriff's office was buzzing, speeding squad cars to the north end of the city to set up roadblocks which, in a matter of minutes, would be trapping Tug Weldon and Jigger O'Dell and their prisoner, Murdock.

Tommy yelled gleefully, "Do you realize, Señor Nils W. Baldwin the Third, what this is going to mean tonight? Ham radio will get the credit for smashing the Purple Shirt Mob—"

"To say nothing of taking the heat off the sheriff—"

"—and clamp a muzzle on guys with their head in the sand like Mr. Kleveland who think all ham radio is good for is to let Tennessee Valley Indians off the reservation," Tommy exulted. "And I'd like to see Weldon's face tonight when he finds out he was trapped by ham radio. After the way Jigger O'Dell smashed up the rig under the dash. Wow, he'll think we're wizards at making fast repairs in the field, eh?"

The two boys subsided, their elation spent. The moon was momentarily hidden behind a ragged nest of fleecy cloud. Everything about this lonely scene had an unreal, macabre quality: the ceaseless passing of cars at high speed, like the sound of ripping paper; the muted drumroll of the ocean surf...

"Look, Doc," Tommy said suddenly. "That can of dope that Slankard chucked off the plane. It's still floating around out there. We can't let that drift out to sea."

Doc grinned. "Maybe it's floated ashore by now. Wouldn't *that* be a souvenir to hand over to Ross when he shows up?"

Tommy said, "Tell you what. You go up to the highway and flag down the sheriff's car when it shows up—and if I know Ross, he'll make that twenty miles in fifteen minutes. Meanwhile, I'll mosey down to the beach and pick up that smugglers' shipment."

They shook hands on it and parted, Tommy heading through the oil company's gate, Doc crossing back over the SP tracks to reach the highway.

Tommy retraced the mobsters' route into the ravine and out onto the open beach. The tide had come in a considerable distance, he noticed; it was well past the spot where Murdock had left his gas lantern. The lantern, its chimney smashed by cold salt water, was now rolling back and forth on the sand, half submerged by the long sheets of water chasing back and forth to the edge of the shingle.

Walking along the water's edge, Tommy strained his eyes for a glimpse of the tiny red beacon lamp attached to the can which Grote Slankard had jettisoned. If its batteries had gotten wet, or if the lamp itself had been broken—

And then he saw it, the familiar winking red dot of light out there to seaward, marking the can which was important enough to cause two members of the Purple Shirt Mob to defect and attempt to hijack.

Wind and crosscurrents, apparently, had drifted the smugglers' shipment considerably to the east, a hundred yards or more, but

without sweeping it any closer to shore. In fact, it seemed to Tommy that it was closer to the dark floating kelp beds off shore than it had been.

"Nothing to do," he decided, "but swim for it—"

Seating himself on a boulder encrusted with barnacles and marine lichen, Tommy took off his sweater, his T-shirt, blue jeans and tennis shoes. The raw wind bit his flesh as he stripped off shorts and socks and, knowing he had to get it over with in a hurry or not at all, he sprinted into the water and dived into the first large comber.

The shock of the icy water passed off as soon as he surfaced. He struck out for the floating red light with powerful, rhythmic strokes. Football season, only just finished, had put him in top physical shape; and swimming had always been one of his favorite sports.

Two more rows of breakers, and he found himself treading water alongside the smuggler's red light.

Close up, the object had a malignant look, like a trap or a grenade. It was a corrugated metal canister about the size of a five-gallon can, painted a smoky, neutral blue which, in daylight, would have rendered it virtually invisible.

The canister was covered with tarred fish netting—this, in all probability, to enable Murdock to snag it with his fishing line and reel it ashore. The fact that the canister rode the water in a vertical position, as untippable as a roly-poly, told Tommy that the bottom had been weighted to keep the red flashlight bulb always in view above water. The flashlight lamp projected through a hole in the top of the canister, by way of a watertight rubber grommet.

The canister was easy enough to handle while swimming. Hooking one hand through the heavy webbing, Tommy turned about and in a few moments of side-stroking felt his feet on bottom again. When he reached water too shallow to swim in he picked up the can in both arms, and was astonished to find how heavy it was.

He rolled the canister up onto dry ground and returned to where he had left his clothes heaped on the rock. This night dip had invigorated him, eased the tension which his adventures had put in his nerves.

He rubbed himself dry with tufts of dead grass and, before the night breeze could chill him to the marrow, hurried back into his clothes.

The faint moan of sirens told him that the sheriff's cars had

arrived. He jogged back up the beach, and picked up the heavy canister. Hoisting it to one shoulder, he set off on the return jaunt to the ravine.

The red light bulb still glowed. It put a satanic scarlet sheen on his face. He was nearly abreast of the trampled sand where Weldon and O'Dell had swooped down on Murdock when he heard someone shouting his name.

Glancing around, he caught sight of Doc and Sheriff Jackson skylined on the rim of the cliffs opposite him. They were gesticulating wildly as if to attract his attention.

"I got it, Ross!" Tommy shouted triumphantly. "Must be fifty pounds of cocaine for Exhibit A against those criminals. Everything but the Purple Shirt insignia painted on the—"

Tommy halted in his tracks, aware that something was wrong. Doc and the sheriff had found a broken fissure in the shale embankment and were scrambling down over the edge, plunging to the beach level in a shower of pebbles and dust.

Then, still fifty feet away, Ross Jackson cupped his hands over his mouth and yelled above the mutter of the surf, "*Put that can down! Might be booby-trapped, blow you to kingdom come*! Set it down easy and run for it, Tommy!"

A spasm of horror pumped adrenalin into Tommy's vitals. Had he been carrying a time bomb all this way?

Why, it was probably true! The Purple Shirt Mob would take every possible precaution against one of their contraband shipments falling into the wrong hands if it got lost, by planting a time bomb inside each container. Murdock would know how to defuse it.

With infinite care, Tommy squatted down and eased the canister off his shoulder, setting it on the sand as if it were fragile as a soap bubble. Then, recoiling, he broke into a run, back muscles tensing as if he expected to be knocked sprawling by the concussion of a blast at any second.

Moments later he was jouncing to a halt between Ross and Doc and they were pounding him on the back, their voices babbling in his ears: "Sorry to throw a scare into you, Tommy, but it could be packing a few sticks of dynamite easily enough," the sheriff managed to out-shout Doc. "Set to detonate, maybe, when the pilot light petered out and opened a DC relay or something."

Tommy said, "I was stupid, swimming out there and fishing it out of the surf. But I knew intercepting a haul would be worth a lot

to you if this recall election of Kleveland's comes up, Ross—"

Heading back to the ravine trail now, Ross said, "I've already put a call back to the office for them to send a bomb disposal expert out here to check it over. No one in my office is qualified to pull the stinger on a booby trap, but the army will help us. Meanwhile it's safe enough, up above high water mark. It can blow now without harming anyone."

Tommy began to shiver, from the reaction of his nervous tension rather than the cold night air.

"I don't suppose you've had a report from the roadblock squad yet?" he asked suddenly. "The Porsche hasn't been picked up?"

"No word yet," Jackson said. "There may be when we get back to the car, though."

Climbing out of the brushy ravine, the three headed toward the oil company gate. Jackson's official car, red lights flashing, was parked where the Porsche had been, while a county wrecker, equipped with an A-frame, was just now backing up to hook onto Tommy's car and tow it back to town. Two uniformed state highway patrolmen stood guard over the area near the fence where Doc had pointed out the distinct footprints of Weldon and O'Dell in the soft dirt. Plaster casts would be made of those tracks to use as evidence in proving that the two smugglers had trespassed here, as Doc and Tommy would be testifying in court.

Walt Olson, a former pro baseball pitcher who was Tommy's favorite deputy on Jackson's staff, was manning the radio in the sheriff's car as they approached.

"The red Porsche hasn't approached any of the roadblocks yet," Olson reported. To Tommy the deputy said, "Don't worry—they can't possibly slip through our dragnet. We've got squad cars waiting up north, at Gaviota Pass, just in case they turn around and head the other way."

Ten minutes later Deputy Olson was driving Jackson and the two boys back toward Santa Bonita.

"Tommy," the sheriff said gravely, "I want you to stay at my home tonight, if you don't mind, to keep you away from the newspaper reporters. Especially Chet Kleveland. You can understand why I want to keep this under wraps—we don't want Grote Slankard to know anything happened to his Santa Barbara County contact. O'Dell and Weldon are just a couple of mugs. Murdock is more important, but

it's Slankard himself we want to trap."

Tommy said, "I'll be glad to bunk at your place tonight, Ross, but I need to feed and walk my dog. Besides, how would the newspapers get wind of what happened? They don't keep a reporter at the courthouse around the clock."

Ross Jackson grinned. "You forget you broke this case via ham radio, Tommy. I'll lay odds the Los Angeles papers have reporters on the way up to Santa Bonita already."

"But," protested Tommy, "we were careful not to give out any details—"

"I know you were," Ross agreed, "and I appreciate that. But the few key words you did have to use—roadblocks, your car being wrecked, putting a man to watch a cabin cruiser at the wharf—you really had the Channel Cities Net agog. I'll send a fellow over to take care of Spiffy."

Jackson turned to Doc Baldwin, who sat leaning back in the cushions with his beloved Ten Tec hand-held resting on his lap, as if it were too precious to have out of his sight.

"Doc, if anyone calls you or drops by your house tonight or tomorrow, from the press, just say 'no comment,' understand?"

"Roger. No comment."

"Because," Ross Jackson said soberly, "I feel we'll have O'Dell and Weldon and this Murdock character locked up within an hour or so—maybe they've already been picked up, although Ole should have had that report on the radio by now if it had happened. But the main thing is to get Grote Slankard to make another one of his contraband drops in our territory—and catch him red-handed."

"Gosh," Tommy breathed, "if you could break up the Purple Shirt Mob, something the whole LA police force haven't been able to do—you'd be able to dictate your own terms to Kleveland, Ross."

Ross said, "I hold no grudge against the *News-Star*. All I want to see is Slankard behind bars. And if that happy day dawns, Tommy, it will reflect to your credit, yours and Doc's, and to the whole community of ham radio."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The insistent ringing of a bedside telephone awakened Tommy Rockford next morning.

For a moment he couldn't remember where he was; then it came to him. Sheriff Jackson's home on upper Laguna Street. Ross was keeping his star witness under wraps, away from the newspaper reporters.

Reaching for the phone, Tommy glanced at his wristwatch—and sat bolt upright. Nine thirty—and he was supposed to report for work at Val's Wholesale Radio Supply every morning at eight during Christmas vacation! Paying off what he owed on the Heathkit HW-5400 transceiver depended on the overtime pay he'd get from Val Shannon over the holidays...

Sheriff Jackson was on the line.

"I let you sleep in, Tommy, and I let Val know, so don't worry about your job."

"Hey!" Tommy yelled. "You've captured Weldon? Any trouble with O'Dell's machine pistol?"

When he had turned in at ten o'clock last night, tuckered out by his adventures earlier in the day, the roadblocks had not as yet picked up the Purple Shirt gangsters. This, Ross Jackson had conceded, meant that Weldon, spotting trouble ahead, had turned around, hoping to escape the dragnet by way of some side road through the country. Jackson's cordon by this time had closed the ring, however, making any escape practically impossible.

"Not so fast, Tommy." The glum tone of Jackson's voice did not bode well. "To both questions, the answer is negative."

"You mean—they're still inside the dragnet, holing up? Forcing you to hunt 'em out and smoke 'em down?"

"I wish that were it," Ross said, "but the bad news is simply that the smugglers slipped through our trap last night. We have conclusive proof of it."

A feeling akin to nausea hit the boy. He could imagine the political capital Chester Kleveland's *News-Star* would make of this—Sheriff Jackson having the Purple Shirt mobsters in his grasp and letting them slip through his fingers.

"The bad news runs this way." Ross Jackson continued, "in chronological order... Your red Porsche, California plates GVM068, was reported as an abandoned automobile at one thirty-five this morning by the manager of the drive-in theater out at Goleta."

"The drive-in—" Tommy echoed incredulously.

"The car turned up when the last show closed and the audience drove out, leaving one red Porsche deserted near the projection booth shanty."

The drive-in theater, Tommy was remembering, was a good seven miles north of Santa Bonita's roadblock.

"I suppose," Ross went on, "that Tug Weldon deduced the chances were good that you'd been in radio communication with me while you and Doc were trailing the Porsche away from the wharf yesterday, so he ditched it at the drive-in and phoned for a taxi, using the theater's snack bar phone."

Tommy said heavily, "I could kick myself for not reporting by radio as soon as we left the wharf—but I was so afraid I'd lose sight of the Porsche and never see it again—"

"Water over the dam, Tommy," Ross said. His voice sounded shaky, as if he'd been up all night, which he no doubt had. "Anyway, the box office girl at the drive-in remembers a Courtesy Cab arriving to pick up three fares at around eight o'clock. The cab driver was from Goleta, not Santa Bonita, and he says one of the men was drunk, passed out."

"That would be Murdock."

"Yeah... The cab dropped them at the University bus stop near the airport. They boarded a Los Angeles bus and got through our roadblock, of course, without any difficulty at all."

Tommy was too stunned to comment. The sheriff went on, "In other words, the three of them were getting off the bus at the terminal

in Los Angeles, ninety miles away, an hour or more before their Porsche was reported by the drive-in."

Tommy swallowed back the aching lump that rose in his throat. He blamed himself for not getting in contact with the sheriff last evening by radio instead of making that wild chase up Highway 101. A guard posted at the cabin cruiser in Santa Bonita harbor would have been able to pick up the three mobsters.

"A few other minor items," the sheriff added. "State highway cops found an abandoned sidecar motorcycle parked off the highway where Murdock was doing his fishing last night. We assume that's the vehicle Murdock used in reaching the rendezvous point from wherever his home base was. We've got detectives checking every hotel, rooming house and auto court in the Tri-County area for a tenant who turns up missing. A tenant owning a motorcycle, that is."

Tommy asked listlessly, "How about the cabin cruiser?"

"The *Eye-Dull-Our*? You hit the jackpot there, Tommy. Coast Guard has impounded it. It's the *Skipalong*, all right—positively identified by engine numbers and so on. And we lifted a mess of fingerprints off the boat—including a full set of yours, no doubt. We transmitted the prints by radio facsimile to the FBI to check on. Expect their reports back any time this morning."

After a pause, Ross Jackson said, "Jean has breakfast waiting for you downstairs, Tommy, and she'll drive you down to Val's to work. Your car is in the county garage here. And Tommy—"

"Yeah?"

"Feel like one last kick in the teeth?"

"You mean about that canister full of dope?"

"Right. It *was* booby-trapped. The army's demolition expert and bomb disposal chief, Colonel Ralph Miles, got the thing dismantled by eight forty-five last night, up there on the beach. He said it carried five sticks of dynamite, timed to blast at nine sharp."

Tommy felt wobbly all over.

"But on the happier side," the sheriff's tired voice came over the wire, "Colonel Miles has turned over to us roughly two hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of pure cocaine, straight from South America. So think about that haul, Tommy, if you get to feeling guilty for those hoods making their getaway last night."

"Okay, Ross. Seventy-three."

"Seventy-three. See you. And remember—no statements to the

press."

"Word of honor."

Tommy got up, showered and dressed, and went downstairs to find the sheriff's wife, Jean, ready with a breakfast fit for the gods. Midway through the leisurely meal, the sheriff's office rang, asking for Tommy. It was Hugh Britton, chief radio man.

"Ross was busy, so he asked me to pass long the FBI's reports on your three playmates last night, Tommy. Their fingerprint records, that is. Interested?"

"Oh, vaguely, I guess."

"Okay. First, Tug Weldon. Real name, Walter F. Tugwell. Certified Public Accountant. Operates Blue Lobster Cafe in Santa Monica. Served time in the '70s for peddling drugs to juveniles, released on parole last year. Suspected of being linked with Grote Slankard's Purple Shirt Mob, but no positive evidence."

Tommy, even after all he had been through, found it hard to believe that Tug Weldon, so courteous and soft-spoken, could be guilty of one of the most heinous crimes known—that of luring minors into the hell of drug addiction. Why, that was far worse than murder. Drugs tortured before they killed.

Britton's dry monotone rambled on. "Jigger O'Dell. Small-time grunt-and-groan phony on the TV wrestling circuits. Reason FBI had his prints on file, he was dishonorably discharged from the navy in 1973 for bodily assault on a chief petty officer. String of aliases, but O'Dell seems to be his name in the ring."

"How about Murdock?" Tommy asked. "He wouldn't have left any prints aboard the *Skipalong*."

"No. But he left plenty on the motorcycle. Brace yourself, Tommy. Murdock is the *really* big fish who slipped off the hook last night—Weldon and O'Dell were minnows. Murdock's full name will tip you off. Murdock Slankard."

"*Slankard?* Any relation to Grote?"

"Older brother. No wonder he was the go-between to pick up the stuff Slankard delivered by plane! No wonder a couple of petty dope pushers like Weldon and O'Dell decided to move in on Murdock Slankard for their hijack attempt."

Tommy felt a sick shiver slide down his spine. Murdock Slankard was the fisherman in oilskins and hipboots who had defied his captors at gun's point last night, refusing to reel in the canister of cocaine.

"Anyway," Hugh Britton said, "we'll see no more of those three in Santa Barbara County. I have a hunch Murdock's body will show up in the LA morgue any day now. And sooner or later the law of gangland will catch up with Weldon and O'Dell. Their gooses are cooked."

Shortly before eleven o'clock, Mrs. Ross Jackson drove Tommy downtown to Val's Wholesale Radio Supply on East Ortega Street, having previously established that the store was not under the surveillance of newspapermen who knew Tommy had a part-time job there.

The moment he stepped through the front door of the store, though, Tommy wished he had asked Mrs. Jackson to let him in through the alley entrance. Val's store was the only one in Santa Bonita which stocked ham radio gear, and as a result, any Saturday morning the year round, it was bound to be jammed with hams.

On this particular morning, it seemed to Tommy that the entire Channel Cities Net membership was on hand, from K6LFQ, Left-Footed Quarterback, who is blind, to W6WYN, the net control station who lived forty miles away in Oxnard.

In the center of the buzzing group of radio hams was Doc Baldwin, who was patiently saying "No comment" to all questions about last night's mysterious emergency traffic during the net ragchew.

First operator to spot Tommy Rockford was W6WYN, Hal Rich, decked out in his navy uniform. A moment later Hal had Tommy backed up against the wall.

"Old 'CRJ just clams up and won't give," 'WYN complained. "We want to know about that roadblock business and that cabin cruiser and why newspaper reporters have been buzzing around Doc's QTH all morning, Tommy. Come on, give."

Tommy shook his head, staring out over the crowd of hams to catch the eye of his boss, Val Shannon. Shannon, a balding, cigar-smoking man who was the guiding light of amateur radio in Santa Bonita, was known, jokingly, around the world as W6DJS, "Dirty Jerk Shannon."

"Sorry, gang," Tommy said, getting Val's wink. "Sheriff's orders—no can make with the modulation. Anybody for bridge?"

Val Shannon called out authoritatively, "Hey, you guys, break it up. Tommy, haul your lazy carcass back to the stock room and start unpacking that new shipment of TV tubes. When you get that done, inventory our Citizens' Band gear—"

"Okay, you guys," shouted Doc Baldwin, "let 'ATX through. He's already missed half a day's work and he's got that HW-5400 rig to pay for."

That evening Tommy Rockford worked through to seven o'clock. Mrs. Shannon, Val's bookkeeper, brought him supper in the shipping room at five, inasmuch as reporters from Los Angeles were now patrolling the front entrance, hoping to sound out Tommy on the mysterious events of the night before, on which the sheriff's office had clamped such a tight lid of censorship.

At seven, Tommy told his boss, "I'd be glad to work clean through till midnight, Val, except that I've got a sked with a MARS station in Hawaii at nine sharp to talk to my folks."

Val Shannon accompanied Tommy to the back door of his storage warehouse, where Tommy would make a secret exit to thwart the tenacious newsmen out front.

"Editor Kleveland himself dropped into the store this afternoon." Val chuckled. "Mad as a hornet. Accuses Jackson of suppressing news, gagging the press. Wanted to see you. I told him you'd gone out on deliveries, wouldn't be back."

Tommy stepped out into the pit blackness of the alley behind the radio store. Val said, "What *did* happen last night?"

Tommy chuckled uneasily. "You're a darned good boss to work for, Val, and I'd like to keep my job until I'm ready to leave for college next year. But—"

"I know—no comment." W6DJS laughed. "Well, seventy-three to you. I'll be reading the mail when you have that QSO with your folks in Hula-land, but I won't break in. Where'll you be—fifteen-meter band?"

"Right—the operator at the end will be Eddie Jones, W6DOB and W6AET's son, and it'll be KH6 Sierra Papa."

Val's store was within easy walking distance of the courthouse. Slipping out past the storage racks where Val kept his stock of TV masts, Tommy succeeded in outwitting the press's back alley scout and, then minutes later, slipped unannounced into the sheriff's radio room. He found one of his best friends on the staff, Barney Ontiveros, manning the communications equipment. Barney was W6FFF.

"Hi, Triple-F. Any developments? Is Ross in?"

Ontiveros shook his head. "Sheriff's gone home to get some sack time. About the only developments are that that Porsche's parked in

the same garage with your wreck. Owners will be up from North Hollywood to claim it tomorrow."

"Wouldn't mind owning that sports car. Plenty of engine."

Ontiveros said, "Seeing as how your wheels are zorched, how are you getting home these days?"

Tommy grinned. "I've got a nine o'clock sked with Hawaii on fifteen, Barney. Seeing as how the press is hanging around breathing down my neck, I was wondering if I could mooch—"

Ontiveros waved him off and picked up a microphone.

"Car Seven, calling Car Seven."

A voice Tommy recognized as Deputy Olson's, the baseball pro who had coached him through his high school baseball career, answered instantly: "Car Seven, Olson."

"Report for special taxi duty, Walt. That is all."

"Roger. Am at the corner of State and Victoria, will pick up my fare in three minutes."

Ontiveros grinned. "You've got VIP status around here these days, kid. But don't let Chet Kleveland know Jackson's providing you with free taxi service or he'll come out with an editorial about wasting the taxpayers' gasoline."

Twenty minutes later Deputy Olson, driving a car with no insignia or special license plates to identify it as being from the sheriff's department, rolled up in front of the Rockford residence on Mission View Road, atop the mountain foothill overlooking the city.

The street was deserted; no newspaper scouts were lurking here. Tommy said goodnight to the deputy and headed up the curving driveway which led to the outdoor garage and his upstairs radio shack. Spiffy, leashed at the foot of the stairs gave Tommy a welcoming bark.

The Rockfords lived in an unpretentious home built in the prevailing Mission Colonial style with white stucco walls, red tile roofs, and California landscaping which featured a cactus garden and, at this Christmas season, riotously blooming poinsettia hedges which thrust their spike-petaled blossoms as high as the eaves.

Tommy's amateur radio station K6ATX occupied a small room above the double garage, separate from the house. From the roof of the garage rose a tower over eighty feet in height, which supported a fifteen-meter beam capable of squirting signals into any corner of the world, and a smaller twin-five two-meter beam with vertical polarization.

Both antennas could be rotated by means of a military surplus propeller-pitch motor so as to direct a radio signal in a given direction. A folded dipole completed Tommy's "antenna farm."

Tommy headed down the driveway between clipped hedges. His hamshack was reached by a flight of outdoor stairs leading to a platform at the gable end of the garage. Tommy unhooked Spiffy from his leash and he bounded up the steps. At the foot of the stairs, Tommy switched on a floodlight—and was startled to see a shadow step away from the stone bench across the patio where his mother had her barbecue and rotisserie.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The shadow came closer. Spiffy barked sharply.

"Hi, Tommy!" Spud Kleveland's high-pitched voice was a-tremble with eagerness. "You were going to let me see your ham radio stuff tonight, remember?"

Tommy's cheeks ballooned with relief.

"Whew—I thought you were some nosy newspaper reporter," he laughed, "hiding out for me to get home. How yuh doin', Spud?"

Walking across the patio, Spud looked ungainly and beanpole thin in his sweatshirt emblazoned with the high school monogram—his official uniform as football waterboy—jeans and tennis shoes. The latter items were in slavish imitation of the campus garb worn by popular athletes.

Spud bent to pet Spiffy and grinned. "Dad would give his eye teeth to know where to find you, Tommy. I didn't tell him I had a date with you tonight. Dad's been trying to get hold of either you or Doc Baldwin all day."

"I know." Tommy chuckled, clapping a hand on Spud's shoulder and heading him up the garage stairway. "We're important characters, all of a sudden."

"Something to do with ham radio, too, isn't it?"

Tommy said, "Sort of. I don't want to sound mysterious, but Doc and I are sort of under orders not to talk about—about the thing your dad is trying to find out for his paper. No hard feelings?"

"Don't be silly!"

Arriving at the top landing, Tommy was fishing in his pocket for his key ring when he suddenly remembered: Doc had lost his keys last

night on their way back from seeing the smugglers' rendezvous on the lonely beach twenty miles away.

"Stand by one," Tommy said, "while I go down to the garage and pick up a spare key."

He was back in a moment, unlocking the door on which was lettered AMATEUR RADIO STATION K6ATX above a diamond-shaped insignia of the American Radio Relay League, the national ham organization.

Opening the door, Tommy reached in to turn on the lights. There, spread out before Spud's astonished eyes, was the first ham station he had ever seen—Tommy Rockford's magic carpet to any spot on the earth's surface.

"Gosh—Tommy—it's—well, it's wonderful."

Tommy made a deprecatory gesture. "Just average. I'm not running the legal limit—and I'm not exactly low power, either. Just average. And mostly homebrew."

Tommy was not being unduly modest in appraising his hamshack; there were thousands approximately like it scattered throughout the fifty states. The room itself was small, about ten by twelve feet in size; the operating position was a horseshoe-shaped table in the corner opposite the door.

The walls and most of the ceiling were completely papered with QSL cards, representing radio hams all over the world with whom K6ATX had been in two-way contact.

"Well, there she is," Tommy said, escorting his guest inside and closing the door. "A hundred watts phone and CW on all bands from a hundred sixty through ten meters. Plus a Heathkit two-meter base station."

Spud, wide-eyed with awe, said, "Show me everything, Tommy. it's all Greek to me so far, but if I can ever talk Dad into letting me, I'll get on the air someday too—"

"Sure you will," Tommy said heartily. "The hobby isn't expensive—you can get started with used equipment for under two hundred bucks complete. It doesn't take much room—a card table can accommodate a complete station. And you meet the grandest bunch of guys and gals you'd ever want to know, anywhere in the world."

Thus began what Tommy called his "two-bit guided tour" of K6ATX. Most of the equipment meant less than nothing to Spud

Kleveland—the Matchbox antenna coupler, the all-band transceiver and CW audio filter, the antenna rotator.

Most of the equipment Tommy had made himself, out of surplus parts. The only objects Spud could recognize were the microphone, loudspeaker and telegraph key.

"...This is the logbook, where I keep track of the contacts I make," Tommy wound up his tour of inspection, "and here, the best for the last, is my big love, my fondest possession. Spud, meet my transceiver—the modern equivalent of the one I restored for the high school club—my Heathkit HW-5400."

Spud gazed down at the gleaming knobs and dials, the meter and switches and cabinet lid, like a child inspecting a strange new toy he could not identify.

"You—you didn't make this yourself?" Spud asked incredulously.

"Yes and no. I bought it in kit form, you see, and wired it up. Saved myself fifty or sixty bucks worth of labor costs. You can buy transceivers all ready to go, but you miss out on half the fun, doing it that way. These Heathkit jobs use top-grade components, too, so you know when you're finished you've got something that will last indefinitely."

Spud's eyes strayed to a series of what appeared to be framed diplomas above the operating bench; they resembled the sheepskins on display at a doctor's office.

"Is one of those your ham license?" Spud asked eagerly.

"That little three-by-five there," Tommy said. "Mine happens to be Amateur Extra Class, but you could start with a Novice, work up through Technician to a General, which gives you enough privileges. I'm as proud of that old ham ticket as I'll ever be of a Cal Tech diploma. And my call—K6ATX—it's my exclusive identification for life so far as radio is concerned."

Spud's eyes flashed enviously. "What's the WAS paper?"

"ARRL certificate for Working All States. You have to have confirmed QSO's from all fifty states to qualify. I worked forty-four states in two months but it was three years before I got the holdout. Delaware. Boy, was I glad to hook ol' W3TXY—"

"And that one that says WAC—"

"Worked All Continents—not too difficult, of course. What I'm working for now is the DXCC, the DX Century Club. DX stands for

distance. That takes a hundred foreign countries confirmed—QSL cards, that is."

Spud stared around at the hundreds of QSL cards already tacked to Tommy's walls and ceiling.

"It looks as if you've talked to every place there is."

"Only eighty-four countries confirmed so far," Tommy said. He pointed to a card marked 5R8AL, Malagasy Republic. "This is as far as you can get away from Santa Bonita—exactly halfway around the globe. And that OX3UE is from Thule, Greenland, the most northerly QTH in the world. That one marked FOØXX is a rare one—from an expedition some hams made to Clipperton, an uninhabited island off the coast of Mexico."

Spud, feeling he should be making a few intelligent-sounding remarks, said, "I notice each country has a different prefix, just like different cities have different telephone prefixes—"

"Right," Tommy said. "In America most stations start with a W or a K, whether they are ham, broadcast or TV stations. Because there are so many of us, some ham calls begin with N or A in addition to W and K. Us hams can usually tell the region a call is coming from because the US is divided into ten call zones. Roughly, New England is W1, New York area W2, Pennsylvania area W3, the Deep South W4, the Texas area W5, California is W6, the Northwest W7, Rocky Mountain and Dakotas W zero, Ohio area W8, Illinois area W9. And so on, around the world—England is G, Japan is JA, Russia is U, Australia is VK, and so on."

Tommy paused to check his watch against a noisy alarm clock which was ticking away on his operating bench—it was set like a ship's chronometer to Coordinated Universal Time.

"Too broke to get a fancy electric twenty-four-hour clock," Tommy said, "so I have to use that noisy ticker. It's getting along toward twenty-one hours, nine o'clock Pacific Standard Time, Spud, and that's when we'll be having our sked with Honolulu to talk to my folks. They'll be boarding the steamer to come home later tonight."

He drew up a chair for Spud, alongside his own, and the two boys sat down. Throwing the "big switch," Tommy turned on the HW-5400 and scouted around for a clear frequency to tune his antenna on. Spud, aware that these preparations meant K6ATX would be on the air in a matter of moments now, felt his heart pounding as he watched Tommy check dial settings, meter readings and switch

positions.

"My new HW-5400 has a VOX control as well as a manual switch for transmitting and receiving," Tommy explained. "VOX stands for voice-operated switch. When the VOX is on, the sound of my voice turns on the transmitter, and when I stop talking, the rig switches automatically to receive. That leaves my hands free to log or take notes. Tonight I'll use the manual switch instead of the VOX," Tommy continued. "That way if Spiffy takes a notion to bark, or if one of us has a coughing fit, it won't be automatically transmitted."

"You know Lloyd Jones, chief engineer up at KEYT? His son Eddie is stationed with the submarine base at Pearl Harbor. Hams are allowed to operate on a military base over what they call the Military Affiliate Radio Service—MARS for short. If all went well, Dad and Mom will be over at the base hamshack."

Spud Kleveland was quivering like a puppy with the thrill of what he was about to experience. This keenly intellectual radio hobby appealed to Spud's sense of values.

"Here's how we keep a transpacific sked," Tommy went on, adjusting the dial of his receiver. "KH6SP—that's the MARS station in Honolulu—will be calling me at seven o'clock on the nose, Hawaii time—that's about thirty seconds from now. He'll be on 21,300 kilohertz...that's in the amateur fifteen-meter band."

Ordinarily, Tommy used headphones for better reception. For Spud's benefit, he now plugged in a separate speaker, from which came the soft whishing sound of normal atmospherics. Pre-setting his tuning dial to 21,300 kHz, Tommy sat back to wait, his eyes glued to the digital display on his watch.

"Now," Tommy whispered, at straight up nine o'clock. Spud felt gooseflesh erupt over his backbone as the loudspeaker suddenly came alive with a humming sound like water spilling over smooth rock.

"That's Eddie, right on the second," Tommy said, opening his spiral-bound logbook and noting the time. "Alternate QSOs I call him; tonight he calls me. We do this every week..."

The speaker now carried the sound of someone breathing experimentally into the mike, whistling to check power; then a cough in the background which Tommy recognized as his mother, and a subdued rattling of papers, a whispered "We're on the air."

Then Eddie Jones's distinct, pleasant voice filled the room:

"K6ATX...K6ATX...Santa Bonita, California, USA... Kilo

Six Alfa Tango X-ray in Santa Bonita, California, here is Kilo Hotel Six Sierra Papa, KH6SP, MARS station in Honolulu, Hawaii, calling K6ATX on schedule..."

While Spud sat entranced, KH6SP repeated his sequence of calls three times, followed by, "I hope the band's open tonight, Tommy—your father and mother are here and everything's perfect at this end. How do you copy tonight?"

Spud saw Tommy flip a manual switch which blanked out the receiver and connected the HW-5400 transmitter with the coaxial transmission line leading to the beam antenna. During Hawaii's transmission Tommy Rockford had carefully rotated the antenna system to maximum loudness of signal, which meant his own signals would be similarly peaked two thousand miles away in Hawaii.

"KH6SP, Honolulu," Tommy began, the mike close to his lips, "this is K6ATX in Santa Bonita, California, right back to you. Your signal is a good twenty dB over nine on the S-meter tonight, Eddie, very fine business indeed. Everything's terrific here also, and I've got a guest in the shack who'll be sending his Christmas greetings to Alohaland later on in the QSO. Can hardly wait to hear the folks, so I'll shoot 'er back to you, Eddie. KH6SP Hawaii, this is K6ATX by.'

Spud saw Tommy's face soften with emotion as the familiar voice of his mother, vacationing two thousand miles away, spoke as distinctly as if they were together in this hamshack:

"Hello, Tommy dear. Your voice sounds so natural. It—it's so silly, I always get tongue-tied when I face a microphone... We're boarding the ship in a couple of hours, Tommy, so you'll see us arriving on the Morning Daylight commuter hop Christmas day. Now here's Dad."

Tommy's father chatted about Waikiki and their tour to the Pali and a chartered plane ride the day before to Hilo and the awesome fuming crater of Mauna Loa. Before Spud realized it a full half-hour conversation had elapsed and Tommy was saying, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, may I present a heck of a neat guy, a buddy of mine, who will now make his radio debut. Mr. Chester Holcombe Kleveland III, better known as Spud. You know my folks, Spud, so take over. The mike's yours."

Spud accepted the table microphone. His free hand gripped the edge of the operating bench as if he were squirming out from under a dentist's drill, his lips working, but no sound coming forth. After

a few seconds of this, Tommy reached for the mike.

"I'm afraid Spud is acting like everyone else does their first time on the air, folks," he explained. "Mike fright, but this time I'll bet it's different."

With a sheepish grin, Spud cleared his throat and then bellowed into the microphone: "Merry Christmas, Mr. and Mrs. Rockford, and—I hope you have smooth sailing coming home—and—well, good-by—"

A final exchange of "bon voyages" and seasons' greetings, and the Hawaiian station signed clear. Tommy noted the sign-off time in his log and then turned to Spud, who was crimson with embarrassment.

"Don't give it a thought, old boy," Tommy said. "I froze up my first time on the air, as frustrated as a broken-billed woodpecker running amok in a shingle factory. Couldn't even remember my own name."

To get Spud's mind off his humiliation, Tommy band-switched his transceiver from fifteen to eighty meters.

"Let's see what the Stateside hams are doing," he said, rocking the receiver dial until a loud phone signal came in at 3955 kHz. "Oh-oh. Recognize that guy yakking now?"

Spud listened intently. "Why, it's—Doc Baldwin, isn't it?"

"Right," chuckled Tommy. "Always yakking, old K6CRJ. That's why his phonetic call sign is 'Constantly Running Jaws.'"

Spud was totally absorbed in Doc's rambling chit-chat:

"—and you'd never believe it, Ann, but Tommy's kick went straight through the uprights and Santa Bonita won, from thirty-nine yards out and only eight seconds left on the clock. Man, what a game! Well, I'll letcha go, Ann, if you and Jean are packing to go to Merced for the holidays. My wish to you is as follows—ABCDEFGHIJKMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ, which if you could play it back, you'd discover was 'no L,' hi. So long for now, K6BGM, Beautiful Girls Marry, San Jose, this is K6CRJ, Santa Bonita, winding up his final-final-final. Good night and eighty-eight."

A young woman's voice, shaking with laughter—Doc Baldwin was known as a card on the air waves—came back: "K6CRJ from K6BGM, okay, Doc. The 'no L' gag was corny but cute, just like you. The OM, W6ZRJ, sez seventy-three and happy holidays. K6BGM off and clear."

Tommy explained, "Ann's a YL Doc likes to yak with up in San

Jose. He's quite a lady's man over the air—and too bashful last week to rustle up a date for the Senior Prom."

"Ann's a YL?" Spud repeated in mystified tones.

"I should have said an XYL. A YL means young lady, unmarried. An ex-YL is a guy's wife. Oh, we've got a slanguage all our own in amateur radio, Spud. Like OM means Old Man, no matter what your age, and seventy-three means best regards, eighty-eight means love and kisses—"

Spud said, "I keep hearing hams talking mysteriously about 'Tennessee Valley Indians.' Is that a trade secret?"

Tommy laughed. "Not exactly. It's our way of not repeating out loud a very, very bad word in ham radio. I mean, the initials of Tennessee Valley Indians are TVI, and in electronics, that means television interference. The worst cross a radio ham has to bear is being accused of hashing up his neighbor's TV reception."

"Oh, yes. Especially in a fringe area like Santa Bonita."

Tommy waggled his head dolefully. "The sad thing is, every time TV sets act up, viewers say, 'It's that blankety-blank radio ham dowr the street interfering again.' Whereas in reality, hams are not to blame, nine times out of ten—it can be an electric blanket or an electric razor, or a neon sign, or the refrigerator motor, or the spark plugs of a passing car. Us hams keep our house clean, believe you me—with shielding and low-pass filters and—"

He was interrupted by Doc Baldwin's deafening local signal from the speaker: "This is K6CRJ in Santa Bonita, standing by for the Wild West Net check-in at twenty-one forty-five hours, and for the next five minutes K6CRJ is QR-Zed on the band."

Tommy reached for the antenna-tuning knob next to his Heathkit HW-5400 transceiver. He turned it, watching carefully until the wattmeter peaked.

"That's called tuning the antenna to my frequency," Tommy explained. "In other words, I've adjusted the resonance of the antenna to precisely the frequency Doc and I are on. And QR-Zed on the band means Doc is listening for anyone who wants to talk until time for his Wild West Net to have roll-call."

Switching on the plate current to the HW-5400, Tommy said into the mike, "You never get your fill of jabbering, do you, Doctor Baldwin? This is K6ATX, as if you didn't know, and I've got Spud Kleveland in the shack tonight. We'll be reading the mail when you

Wild Westerners take over the freq, so take it easle, son, take it easle."

Doc Baldwin came back instantly: "Fine business. Howdy there, Spud. Say, what did you get in Free Hand Drawing? I got a lousy C minus. Back to you."

Tommy flipped the switch, nodding to Spud to "take it."

Forgetting that he was on the air, his voice probably being copied over a two-thousand-mile radius, Spud said, "Hello, Doc. Gosh, this is interesting, thrilling. Me, I got an A plus. But drawing was always a cinch for me, I guess."

Tommy switched back to receive. Doc commented, "You've got a fine radio voice, Spud, didja know that? By the way, Tommy old pal, do you happen to have the December copy of *QST* handy?"

Tommy hauled open a drawer to check his files of radio journals. "Got 'er. What can I do for you?"

"I wish you'd check our club's score in the Field Day standings. Some of the guys on the net wanted to know how we did and I couldn't remember to save me."

As Tommy was fishing the December *QST* out of his files a knock sounded on the door. "Come in," he called in a loud voice, and instantly regretted it. What if it was a newspaper reporter, badgering him in his den?

The door rattled but the spring lock was on. Spiffy let out a low growl.

"Someone at the door, Doc," Tommy said into the mike. "I'm looking up the dope in *QST*, feller. Spud, would you go let that character in before he breaks the door down?"

"Sure, Tommy." Spud Kleveland hurried over to the door, opened it, and stepped outside.

Tommy had just found what he was looking for in the radio magazine and was pulling the mike close when Spud called from the landing outside, "Friend wants to see you, Tommy, but he won't come in."

Tommy said for Doc's benefit, "QRX one, Doc, have to go to the door. I've got your Field Day info. Back in a sec."

He weighted the open magazine down with his telegraph key, accidentally spinning open the mike gain control knob, and crossed over to the door, calling out genially, "It's too cold a night for open-air ragchewing—come on in!"

Tommy opened the door and froze.

A burly, unshaven man was struggling with Spud Kleveland, throttling the boy's inarticulate cries with a huge palm clamped over his face.

With his free hand the man thrust a .45 automatic pistol against Tommy Rockford's chest. From the corner of taut lips came a whisper as malevolent as a snake's hiss:

"Shut the door and come along, kid. We're takin' a ride."

The gunman was Jigger O'Dell. Spiffy, inside the locked door, went berserk.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The "Wild West Net" was unique in ham radio in that its members were without exception sharp conversationalists, with a rapierlike wit, a flair for the *bon mot* and the ready comeback. Unlike some ham nets, whose conversations on the air could be deadly boring at times with their incessant, repetitious discussions of their newest electronic equipment, DX records and the like, the Wild West gang usually had something to say of general interest.

The membership comprised some thirty hams carefully selected from six Western states, Alaska and one Canadian province. As the Net Control station always announced in his roll-call preamble, the Wild West Net assembled promptly at nine forty-five Pacific time every Saturday evening the year round on a frequency of 3820 kilohertz, "for the sole purpose of having a good time."

Because of the diversity of its conversational topics, the Wild Westerners enjoyed a wide listening audience of hams. It was for that reason that several hundred pairs of ears were tuned in at 3820 kHz when one Tommy Rockford, K6ATX, a non-member, started a chat with WWN member Doc Baldwin, K6CRJ, and remarked "QRX one, Doc, have to go to the door. I've got your Field Day dope. Back in a sec."

Up in the village of Bothel, Washington, an eight-year-old prodigy of ham radio, KA7JTW, Sherry, tuned in her receiver in time to hear Tommy calling off-mike, "It's too cold a night for open-air ragchewing—come on in!"

Further north, in Anchorage, Alaska, amateur station KL7IJ, George Burtness, clearly heard 'ATX's footsteps leaving the vicinity

of his operating table, but a burst of auroral static kept him from hearing Tommy's remark at the doorway.

Over in the snow-bound foothills of Montana's Bitterroot Mountains, a school teacher named Joe, holding ham ticket W7TTC, tuned in on the Wild West Net and was startled to hear the wild barking of someone's pet dog obliterating the frequency. Joe said to a lumberjack who had dropped in on his QTH via snowshoes earlier in the evening, "It's time for roll call to start, but some lid left his mike open and his yapping mutt is blocking our frequency. Ruins the wavelength for all of us."

Far to the south, in the dude ranch capital of Wickenburg, Arizona, the Wild West net control operator, W7NDJ, was fuming impatiently. He said to a guest in his shack, "Hear that obnoxious barking sound? That's a dog near the mike in this K6ATX guy's shack. He's stepped out for a minute and left his rig transmitting—an unforgivable breach of etiquette among hams."

In the great central valley of California, W6ADB, Stanley, in Turlock, waited with growing impatience as he heard various stations on the frequency fussing about the QRM.

"That isn't like Tommy, going off and leaving his rig on, Elsie," W6ADB said to his wife. "I know K6ATX better than that. And h' isn't even a member of the net. Something's wrong."

Five minutes dragged by, and still no sound came from Tommy Rockford's station except the urgent barking of Tommy's pet Samoyed. From Alaska to South America, from Hawaii to the midwest, Wild West Net fans began to make their verbal comments about any ham who would carelessly destroy a net this way.

Back in Santa Bonita, net member Doc Baldwin reached for the telephone and dialed 966-7306, Tommy's number.

"I think I know what happened," the embarrassed Doc said to his mother, who always dropped into his hamshack to enjoy the camaraderie of the Wild West gang. "The wind blew the door shut, and there's a spring lock on it, and Tommy can't get back in. I lost his keys for him last night..."

Doc's forehead was creased with worry, a worry he could not quite analyze. He knew that Spud had gone to answer an urgent knock at the door, and had called Tommy to the door. Tommy, thinking he would be back in a matter of seconds, had left his transmit switch open.

For a solid minute Doc let the telephone ring in Tommy's shack. Everyone in a thousand mile radius who was tuned to the frequency could hear the phone ringing in the background, broadcast by K6ATX's live microphone.

Wild Westerners up and down the coast breathed easier, knowing local efforts were being made on the "twisted pair" to attract the absent operator's attention to his error in judgment.

Finally Doc hung up. He complained to his mother, "Even if he's locked out, he ought to yank the main switch at the fuse box to cut his rig off the air. He wouldn't knowingly clobber the whole band, especially not at check-in time, and with Spiffy in there."

Doc shuddered as he sat listening to the solemn barking of Tommy's pooch. That dog's bark had an eerie sound; like the pulsing of a dying heart, or the countdown of a space shuttle launch.

Since no emergency like this had ever arisen, the Wild West Net had no prearranged alternate frequency to QSY to. On a hunch, Doc scooted off the frequency a trifle and called the Net Control station, W7NDJ in Arizona. Arizona came right back: "Don't you guys in W6-land choose strange customs, Doc?"

Doc, in no mood for wisecracking, said irritably, "You heard K6ATX go to open the door, and you heard the door slam. I think he's locked out. I tried to get him on the landline, no luck."

A thousand miles away in Nahcotta, Washington, station W7UFL broke in with a suggestion: "If you live nearby, Doc, why not buzz over to his QTH and yank a fuse to kill his rig? Maybe he was called away for the evening."

"Roger, Ray," Doc replied. "Tommy's a good friend of mine, a top-notch operator, and if he'd known he was going to be away from the mike more than a few seconds he'd have signed clear. I've got an extra key to his shack, so I'll hustle over and see what cooks with 'ATX. It'll take me twenty minutes to get there, though, so I hope the rest of the net can QSY off the freq."

Doc turned back to his receiver, sliding into the WWN slot, hoping to hear the net roll-call underway by some miracle. But there it was, Tommy's faithful Spiffy, and that steady bark bark bark...

Slipping into a windbreaker, Doc bent down to kiss his mother.

"You won't mind staying here alone while I dash over to Tommy's QTH with my spare key to his shack, Mom?"

Mrs. Baldwin laughed wryly. "A doctor's wife, afraid of being

left alone in the house? Don't be ridiculous. Besides, I expect your father home any minute. Use my car, dear."

"Thanks, Mom."

A few moments later Doc Baldwin was at the wheel of his mother's Chevy, heading into the night. The Baldwin home was on Marine Terrace, the southwestern section of town overlooking the ocean. As he turned east on Cliff Drive, he could almost pick out the winking dot of light on the Riviera hill, across the city, which would be the lighted window of Tommy's hamshack.

Doc had his own theory as to what was keeping Tommy out of his shack. He knew that Spud's father had been seeking an interview with Tommy all day, concerning last night's mysterious roadblocks.

"Old man Kleveland found out Spud was visiting Tommy, and went over there determined to find out something for his paper," Doc reasoned. "He can be darned persistent, Kleveland can. Enough to make Tommy forget he'd left his rig on."

Driving up the curved entry in front of the Rockford home, Doc fully expected to find his pal back at his rig when he arrived, very red-faced for having goofed. Leaving a transmitter on and causing interference might bring K6ATX a large fine from the FCC monitors; it could even bring him a license suspension.

Jumping out of the car, Doc saw that the Rockford house was dark, but he expected that, knowing Tommy's parents were on their Hawaiian vacation.

Coming in sight of the garage, he saw that the outdoor stairway leading to the hamshack was empty; he had halfway expected to see Tommy and Spud and Mr. Kleveland up there.

Entering the patio, the first thing that caught Doc's eye was Spud's familiar yellow bicycle, leaning against the barbeque chimney. That was good news, very good news; it meant Spud hadn't gone home yet.

Doc glanced up at Tommy's various antennas, gleaming in the moonrays. The beam he used on fifteen meters, Doc noticed, was heading just south of west—the bearing toward Hawaii, reminding Doc of Tommy's QSO with KH6SP which he had listened in on at nine o'clock.

The faint beginnings of worry were gnawing at Doc Baldwin's subconscious as he raced up the stairs and tried the door of K6ATX. It was locked.

Suddenly trembling, Doc fished out his own spare key to Tommy's

shack, opened the door and stepped inside.

"Tommy? Where are you?"

Spiffy whined toward the door.

Doc's frenzied shout was picked up by radio amateurs all over the country who had tuned across the strong signal on 3820 and were standing by, many of them, for the express purpose of reporting the offending operator's call letters if and when he had guts enough to sign.

K6ATX was deserted.

In two quick strides, Doc Baldwin was at Tommy's operating table, his tongue tingling with the acid secretions of pure fear. Something was wrong, something was very wrong...

Instinct told him to sign off for Tommy—perhaps apologize to the world of ham radio which had been inconvenienced by the interference; but he couldn't bring himself to speak.

He reached out and pulled the big switch, killing the entire station.

Mopping the moisture from his face, Doc began to look around, hunting for clues as to what could have happened. Hoarse from barking, Spiffy was suddenly silent.

Familiar, but significant objects lay here and there. The December issue of *QST*, weighted down by the heavy key to the page where Tommy had been about to read off Field Day information for Doc...

The ticking clock, set to UTC... The neatly stacked *Callbook*, ARRL *Handbook*, some back-copy *CQ* magazines, bound logbooks from years back. Everything in order, perfectly normal.

"His log—"

Doc pounced on the spiral-bound book beside the mike. There was Tommy's QSO with Hawaii; the fact that Spud Kleveland was visiting his shack. And Tommy, always meticulous about keeping his station log up to date, had noted calling K6CRJ, Doc, at 2141—four minutes before time for the Wild West Net to start its check-in.

Doc picked up the pen lying on the logbook, glanced at the loud-ticking clock again, and noted that it was now 2237, ten thirty-seven. As he jotted the time in the log, followed by a "?" and his own initials, Doc whispered, "his transmitter was on almost sixty solid minutes..."

On a hunch, he reached for the telephone and dialed Spud's home. A maid answered; no, Spud was out visiting this evening. Doc hung up without identifying himself.

There was nothing in the room to indicate foul play; no notes of any kind.

He turned back to the phone and dialed Ross Jackson's home. To his infinite relief, the sheriff himself answered.

"Ross, this is Doc. I'm over at Tommy's QTH. Can you get over here right away? I—I'm afraid something has happened to Tommy."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we were having a QSO at a quarter to ten, and somebody came to the door of the shack and Tommy left the transmit switch open while he went to see who it was—"

"Yes—yes! What happened?"

Doc said hoarsely, "I don't know, Ross. Spiffy was barking up a storm, and finally I got worried and drove over here to see what had happened, and—well, he's not here."

There was a pause at the end of the line. Then Sheriff Jackson said, "Stay right there, Doc. I'll be right over."

Doc had hardly hung the receiver on the cradle, it seemed, when he heard a screech of brakes out front, a rattle of steps on the outside stairway, and Ross Jackson, in the shirt sleeves and kitchen apron he had been wearing while he whipped up some popcorn, burst into Tommy's shack.

"Now give me the low-down, just as it happened," the sheriff said in a grim, clipped voice. "I don't like this—"

When Doc had finished his story, Jackson stopped his own restless pacing. "You've touched the doorknob, of course, so we probably wouldn't get any prints of whoever it was Spud opened the door for. And you said he appeared to know who it was, he didn't cry out or anything, so that rules out—a total stranger."

"But where could he have gone?"

"Let's have a look outside, see what we can see."

Heading down the steps, Ross Jackson's trained eye picked up a smudge of gummy, black-oil, crankcase drippings at the parking place where the driveway met the patio paving. Anyone stepping in that sludge would leave tracks, and Sheriff Jackson noticed that a set of recent footprints led all the way from the oily patch to the foot of the stairs leading to Tommy's hamshack.

As Doc Baldwin reached the foot of the stairs he saw that Sheriff Jackson's usual ruddy complexion had bleached to the color of banana meat.

"What's wrong, Ross?" Doc's voice cracked with fright as he saw what the sheriff was pointing to. The clear outline of a corrugated

crepe shoe sole with a distinctive ace of spades insignia in the heel stamped in oil on the bottom step.

"Somebody stepped in that oil slick yonder and came up these stairs tonight," Ross Jackson said. "Have you ever seen that sneaker print before, Doc?"

Doc had to grab the banister railing for support as the truth struck him.

"Last night—up the coast—in that plowed field."

Ross nodded. "Yes. Jigger O'Dell's footprints leading to the beach. We've got plaster casts made of 'em. It means Jigger O'Dell drove back up to Santa Bonita from Los Angeles today, Doc."

Doc's terror-stricken heart slugged his chest.

"And looked up Tommy's address in the phone book—"

The sheriff's jaw muscles hardened. "Looks that way. You and Tommy were the cause of those two hoods losing a quarter-million-dollar narcotics haul last night. A thug like O'Dell would be the type who'd want to get revenge."

Doc licked his lips. "You don't think—O'Dell came here tonight and k—" He couldn't bring himself to say the word "killed." "And kidnapped Tommy and Spud?"

Sheriff Jackson paused a long moment before replying.

"It looks that way. I'm afraid it looks that way, Doc."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

All that Tommy and Spud could be sure of was that they were bound and gagged and cramped side by side in the luggage compartment of Jigger O'Dell's car, driving endlessly through the night.

Their wrists and ankles were trussed together with sash cord; their mouths were plastered with adhesive tape. Before Jigger O'Dell had marched them down the radio shack steps he had blindfolded them with canvas bags—the type business firms use to carry rolls of change to banks for deposit—pulled down over their heads.

O'Dell had marched them across the patio to where his car waited. The gangster's gun muzzle had prodded them into the trunk of the car, the lid had slammed shut, and from that moment onward such elemental things as sense of direction or sense of elapsed time ceased to exist for the boys.

Later Spud Kleveland was to confess that he had the notion that the whole escapade was some sort of ham radio initiation stunt arranged for his benefit, since practical jokes were common in the senior class set to which Tommy belonged.

For Tommy, there was no such mental cushion of comfort. He knew this was a kidnaping, pure and simple, and the most ghastly, tragic aspect of it was that Spud Kleveland, an innocent bystander so to speak, would share the unknown ordeal to come.

Tommy knew they were in terrible danger from the moment O'Dell let gravity roll his car down the sloping Rockford driveway to the street and coasted down Mission View Road for two blocks before switching on the ignition.

Irrelevant thoughts rioted through his mind... I left the rig on... I've clobbered the Wild West Net freq... How will Dad and Mom feel... Who will feed Spiffy... It took guts for O'Dell to drive back from LA, after last night's roadblock.

They were, in O'Dell's underworld idiom, being "taken for a ride"—literally. Tommy knew there was no chance that the kidnaping had been witnessed by a neighbor, for the garage stair was not visible beyond the Rockfords's high hedge.

From the moment O'Dell had slammed the trunk door shut and climbed in behind the wheel, Tommy had tried to concentrate on keeping track of the turns his kidnaper was making. He was pretty sure they were descending from the Riviera hill by way of Alameda Padre Serra, for at the foot of the grade he had heard the muffled sounds of church bells chiming *Adeste Fideles*.

That told him they were passing the old Spanish mission which was Santa Bonita's world-renowned landmark. During the Christmas season, thousands of tourists came to see the Franciscans's life-size nativity crèche, and the bells in the twin towers of the ancient mission played Christmas carols...

After that, Tommy gave up trying to figure where they were or what direction they were traveling. He was alone in a black void where dimensions had no existence, no meaning.

He knew they had traveled a good many miles, and on pavement; but there was no way of knowing whether O'Dell was driving on city streets or open highway, for he kept to a sedate speed, with fairly frequent stops at traffic lights or boulevard signs. Since kidnaping was punishable by death in California, O'Dell was obviously taking no risks of being stopped by some speed cop on a trivial misdemeanor.

In his own mind, Tommy Rockford had accepted the fact that he was about to die. He and Doc Baldwin had caused Tug Weldon and his confederate to abandon Grote Slankard's fabulous airdrop of cocaine last night. The gangsters, fleeing in the red Porsche, undoubtedly had guessed that the two hams were likewise responsible for the sheriff's roadblock.

O'Dell's return to Santa Bonita, then, could only be for purposes of gangland vengeance. And that brought Spud Kleveland, an innocent outsider, into the picture. Would he have a chance to tell O'Dell that Spud was just a high school kid who had the supreme misfortune to be visiting K6ATX when he arrived on his grim mission of

reprisal? Or would they be dragged out of the trunk in some lonely spot, riddled with bullets, and kicked into a shallow grave?

It was smotheringly close inside the loose-fitting canvas hoods; the car trunk was poorly ventilated, and Tommy knew there was danger of being asphyxiated by leaking carbon monoxide from the car's exhaust pipe, or even from the fumes from the gasoline can which was rubbing him in the ribs.

Suddenly Tommy became aware that O'Dell had turned off pavement onto what was either a country dirt road or a blacktop road in a bad state of repair. The fact that it had been quite some time since O'Dell had last stopped for a traffic light could mean that they were several miles out of Santa Bonita. But which direction? Toward Los Angeles, where Tug Weldon was no doubt waiting—or toward San Francisco?

Tommy's backbone jounced and jarred against one edge of the spare tire as O'Dell put the car into second gear and made an extremely sharp left-hand turn onto what was obviously no roadbed at all, but an open field.

Cold despair ran through Tommy Rockford now. This fitted perfectly into the macabre pattern of his conjectures. O'Dell was bringing them to some dead-end mountain canyon, or some isolated coastal oil lease miles from any habitation, where he could commit his murders and dispose of their bodies in safety.

The car came to a stop with wheels grating in rubble. Tommy felt the springs sag to O'Dell's weight as the Purple Shirt gunman got out, came around to the rear of the car and lifted the trunk lid.

The cold inrush of air felt good on their hands. Tommy felt O'Dell tugging at his ankle bonds, and the cords fell free. A moment later O'Dell was grabbing him by the armpits and hauling him out over the rear bumper. Prudently, O'Dell had left his wrists tied together, freeing only his ankles so Tommy could stand alone.

From the sounds which ensued while Tommy tried to regain his equilibrium, O'Dell was hauling Spud out of the trunk, too.

"Now listen to me, you punks," O'Dell said, speaking for the first time since their ordeal by blindfold and gag had begun. "We're taking a walk through this here lemon orchard, you understand? I'm cutting your legs loose, but don't get the notion you can break for it."

Tommy nodded to show he understood. He heard Spud's inarticulate attempts to speak behind his adhesive plaster gag and the

enveloping canvas bag over his head.

O'Dell's heavy hands seized their elbows and turned them around, facing at right angles to the parked car. A cold night breeze was whipping through their jeans. The sound they heard, seemingly a great distance off, must be the ocean surf blending with the wind through the boughs of lemon trees.

"Begin walkin'," O'Dell barked. "Straight ahead."

A thrust in the small of the back from O'Dell's knee sent Tommy stumbling forward, Spud Kleveland at his elbow; he recovered his footing, heard Spud fall with a smothered cry, heard O'Dell mutter a curse and yank the boy to his feet.

Now they were walking on loose dirt, as in a cultivated lemon grove. Foliage whipped the blindfold sack on Tommy's head with a certain regular tempo, further proving that they were walking down a lane between rows of trees.

Then, suddenly, their feet were going up a ramp of some kind, a concrete slope; and from the way the acoustics changed, Tommy believed they had stepped through a doorway into a building, although it had no floor except hard-packed earth.

"Hold it, now. We're going through a narrow door."

O'Dell reached out from behind them, grabbing an arm, halting Tommy and Spud side by side.

A diffused gleam of electric light suddenly showed through the tight-woven fabric of their blindfold sacks, and Tommy knew a door had opened. He was startled to hear a voice greeting O'Dell, a voice he identified instantly as belonging to Tug Weldon: "You fool, Jigger—this wet-nosed youngster isn't the one I saw sitting in Tommy's car on the wharf—this can't be the one who was with him on the beach last night!"

O'Dell snapped defensively, "Didn't say he was, Tug. I cased Rockford's home joint, address they gave in the phone book. Seen a light over the garage, seen through the window it was Tommy. But this chump was visitin' him, and hard tellin' when he might leave, maybe he was stayin' overnight. So I brung him."

Weldon sighed. "Too late now. Okay, bring 'em inside."

Tommy felt O'Dell shoving him up an inclined gangplank into the rectangular glow of light marking a doorway. He bumped his head on a low lintel, and then Tug Weldon's hand was directing him to one side with a brusque "Stand there, Tommy."

He heard Spud follow, breathing asthmatically inside his restricting hood. Tommy was surprised to note that whatever room they were in had a thick-piled carpet underfoot. An electric fixture made a bright nimbus directly overhead, indicating a low ceiling.

Jigger O'Dell remained outside; Tommy got the impression that Tug Weldon had signaled him not to follow his prisoners inside.

"Go bring the car under cover for the night," Weldon ordered. Then, as if by afterthought, he asked his henchman: "What's the state of Murdock's health?"

O'Dell's answer was tongue in cheek: "Murdock? Sad about him. We'll read about it in the mornin' papers, Tug. Must have been a victim of a hit-and-run accident on 101, north of town. Must have been trying to thumb a ride and got bounced into the weeds there where the oil road turns off toward Tucker's Grove."

Tommy's neck hairs went stiff. So Murdock Slankard had been brought back from Los Angeles today and murdered, dumped from a speeding car to make it look like a traffic accident...

Tug Weldon closed the door and cleared his throat tentatively.

"Well, Tommy, we meet again. I'm sorry it has to be under such—uh—melodramatic circumstances. But I am afraid you have only yourself to blame, Tommy. It was very juvenile, really, your inquisitiveness in following Jigger and myself out of town yesterday evening."

As he spoke, Weldon jerked the canvas bag off Tommy's head. Blazing fluorescent lights half blinded the boy, so that Weldon had time to rip the adhesive tape off his mouth before he could bring his eyes to focus on his surroundings.

"This is the house trailer which belonged to our surf fisherman friend of last night's little escapade, you recall," Weldon explained. "Quite luxurious, really, for a criminal."

Tommy looked around. They were standing in what appeared to be the living room of a lavishly appointed house trailer perhaps thirty-five feet in length. Circular porthole-type windows were covered with drapes and metallic Venetian blinds; the daybed and contour chairs were in matching calf's leather; mahogany paneling featured built-in bookcases, water cooler, and the ventilating louvers of a summertime air-conditioning system.

Beyond the door where Weldon stood with Spud, a narrow hallway along one wall led past what was probably a bathroom com-

partment in the amidships section of the trailer, toward a chrome-trimmed, red-and-yellow kitchenette in the front end.

Tommy choked out, "I know—what made O'Dell kidnap me, Weldon, but turn this kid loose. He doesn't know anything about—last night, nothing at all, I swear it. He's only a fourteen-year-old high school freshman—"

Weldon was staring at Spud Kleveland, right elbow supported on his left palm, chin couched in his right palm. Spud was still wearing the canvas bag blindfold.

"Having your chum along complicates things. What's his name?"

"Spud Kleveland."

"Now I call that a good Irish name." Weldon grinned. "What was the name of the friend who was with you in the car when you followed us up the coast last night?"

Tommy's jaw clamped grimly. "Do you think I'd hand my best friend his death warrant? You'd only kidnap him too."

Weldon's gold-capped teeth flashed in an unctuous grin.

"Please don't use such harsh language, Tommy. The Lindbergh Law demands the death penalty in California for kidnaping."

Tommy Rockford was thinking rapidly, trying to figure what line of attack to use on this smiling, self-assured gangster. He decided that the truth was his best weapon: if he were to save Spud's life and his own, it would have to be by convincing Tug Weldon he couldn't get away with two more murders.

"Take us back to town and turn us loose, Weldon. You know we couldn't trace our route back to this hideout of Murdock's."

Weldon's eyes narrowed. "But I have need of your services, Tommy. Getting you here entailed considerable risk. I don't believe you know who I really am, or the significance of what you and your friend must have witnessed on the beach last night."

Tommy saw his opening and took it.

"I know all about you, Weldon. I know you stole that cabin cruiser, the *Skipalong*, and that it was a pickup boat for the Purple Shirt Mob. I know Tug Weldon has served time for dope peddling and that your real name is Walter F. Tugwell and that O'Dell is a cheap TV wrestler with a bad record in the navy. I know that Murdock Slankard is Grote Slankard's brother and—"

Tug Weldon's face went bone white as he lashed out his left hand to slap Tommy Rockford with brutal force across the eyes, silencing

his frenzied outburst. Stepping back, knowing he was no physical match for this brawny football star, the gangster whipped an automatic pistol from his coat pocket.

"You—are exceedingly well informed indeed," Weldon panted hoarsely. "I just assume, then, that you know O'Dell and I attempted to hijack a quarter-million-dollar cocaine shipment last night—"

"The can with the red light on it that was tossed out of the plane? Sure. That coke is locked up in the DA's safe. You haven't got a chance, Weldon. You left your fingerprints on that Porsche and the cabin cruiser—"

"*Wait*!" Tug Weldon snapped. "You know all the answers, you cheap teenage punk, but do you know this one: why did we come back from LA today and run the risk involved with kidnaping you?"

Tommy Rockford's eyes met the gangster's without wavering.

"You want revenge for us knocking you out of that big haul last night—"

Weldon's glittering, reptilian gaze wavered, broke.

"That isn't the answer at all, Tommy," he said in a gentler tone. "Look. Not one word was said about our abandoning that Porsche at the drive-in theater, or the roadblocks that were waiting for us, either in today's papers or on the radio. Why?"

When Tommy did not answer, Weldon said in a tense whisper, "I'll tell you why. The Santa Bonita cops don't want to spill the beans to Grote Slankard, by way of premature publicity, that something went wrong with his smuggling set-up last night."

Tommy thought, You're right so far, Weldon.

Weldon went on, "I've got to assume the cops pumped you plenty about that tape recording on the boat yesterday, how Slankard set up his rendezvous in advance by radio. They've impounded that tape recorder and they'll be monitoring the air for Slankard's next transmission—"

Tommy nodded. "That's why I'm telling you to be sensible and turn Spud and me loose, Weldon. You haven't got a chance. At least you can cancel out that kidnaping charge—"

Weldon sneered back, "But I hold the winning cards in this game with the cops, Tommy. I know when to expect Slankard's next radio message—they don't. When it comes over the air, I'll know how to decode it—they won't."

Tommy blurted, "But you can't decode the message—" and the

moment the words were out he knew he had hit on the reason for tonight's kidnaping. *Weldon wanted more than revenge; he wanted Tommy Rockford's radio skill. Everything hinged on that.*

"Ah," Weldon confirmed that deduction, even as it was forming in Tommy's mind. "That's where you enter the picture, Tommy lad. Slankard's next radio message for Murdock will be transmitted at exactly one o'clock next Tuesday morning. You'll copy down that message for me, and you won't dare double-cross me. Know why?"

"Why?"

"Because"—Weldon's voice sank to a lethal monotone—"O'Dell and I won't turn you two boys loose until Slankard's next contraband shipment is safe in our hands. Cross us up with a fake message, and you'll both die. Play ball with me, and you and Spud will be home alive for Christmas. What do you say, Tommy?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Spud Kleveland gave a little whimpering moan inside his blindfold hood. Tommy's own knees were rubbery. The issue was out in the open now. Take it or leave it. Live—or die.

It occurred to Tommy Rockford that his being an expert radio ham had become the crux of this whole sordid business, the key to Weldon's criminal schemings. Without Tommy's radio knowledge, Weldon was helpless. With it, Weldon could make himself rich for life.

But even if he played along with these gangsters, Tommy was thinking, there was no guarantee that Weldon would live up to his side of the bargain and give him and Spud their freedom.

"I said, how about it?" Tug's voice broke through the despairing run of Tommy's thoughts. "That's why you're here tonight. Make up your mind. But remember, you're playing for keeps. And Spud's life is in your hands. Remember that, Tommy."

Tommy was thinking faster than he had ever thought in his life. Every ideal he had ever absorbed from home or school or church rebelled at the thought of cooperating with a dope smuggler, a crime worse than murder in Tommy's book, for he knew that a drug user, cut off from his supply, would lie or steal or even kill in order to get money to deal with men like this Tug Weldon.

Yet life was sweet to a healthy, mentally superior boy at the threshold of a career. And, as Weldon had so adroitly pointed out, appealing to Tommy's finer instincts, whether Spud Kleveland lived or died—or at least had a chance at freedom—rested squarely on his decision.

He thought, emerging from his own self-torturing arguments, I've

got to outsmart this man somehow; I've got to pretend to play along with him between now and Tuesday morning, and somehow turn the tables on him and O'Dell.

"All right, Weldon," he said in the most depressed tone of surrender he could muster. "You win. I—I'll string along with you."

The tension left Weldon's face as if he was shedding a mask. Stepping around behind Tommy, he pocketed his automatic and, with a pen knife, slashed the cords which up to this moment had been restricting the circulation to Tommy's hands.

"You are a smart kid, Tommy," Weldon complimented him. "It is refreshing to cross wits with you, so to speak, after associating with Jigger O'Dell. I let *him* talk me into stealing that cabin cruiser and bringing it up to Santa Bonita harbor, being stupid enough to think that he could rename it the *Eye-Dull-Our*, and paint it another color, and get away with it. We anticipated a parachute drop into the water, you see—"

As he was speaking, Tug Weldon was cutting Spud Kleveland's bonds and, at long last, lifting the hood off the boy's head. The first thing Spud saw was Tommy's reassuring grin.

Don't worry, his campus hero seemed to be telling him. We'll get out of this mess, Spud.

Massaging the feeling back into his aching wrists and hands, Tommy said, "Where is this bootleg transmitter of Grote Slankard's?"

Weldon stripped off the adhesive tape gag from Spud's lips in a quick, painful jerk that made the younger boy cry out.

"Grote Slankard does his broadcasting from his headquarters outside the State," the gangster said. "Even I, who was his bookkeeper and tax expert—Slankard owns a number of legitimate business firms around LA—even I never found out where the boss had his hideout. In old Mexico, I imagine, but I don't know. You wouldn't have to know that, anyway."

Tommy said, "That depends on what kind of radio equipment Murdock has. I'll have to see his gear—especially his antenna."

Outside the house trailer came the sound of an automobile driving up. Tommy and Spud heard the motor turn off, a door slam, and then a trundling sound, as of a barn door. It came to Tommy then, where they were: this house trailer had been concealed inside a larger building, which, since it was in or near a lemon grove, was probably an abandoned barn or shed well away from any public road and prob-

ably visible only from the air. A gangster like Murdock would select an out-of-the-way spot for his illicit radio station.

"Come with me, boys," Weldon said, once more drawing his automatic and backing away into the corridor leading to the front compartment of the trailer. "I will show you Murdock's radio equipment. You must prepare yourself for something of a shock, Tommy."

Tommy and Spud exchanged scared glances. Spud, Tommy realized, was actually too frightened to talk. When he took Spud by the hand, the younger boy's fingers were ice cold, although it was uncomfortably warm inside the unventilated trailer.

As the boys edged their way up the narrow corridor, the door opened and the scowling, thug-faced Jigger O'Dell entered behind them. It made the shivers crawl down Tommy's spine, realizing that sometime within the past few hours O'Dell had killed a man, tossing his body beside the road.

The corridor led to the kitchenette of the trailer. Every detail was deluxe. Chrome gleamed everywhere—in cupboard knobs, the polished metal edging of a small formica workbench. The divided sink was of gleaming Monel metal; Tommy recognized a miniature refrigerator, electric range and utensil cabinets. Everything was a marvel of compactness and utility; not a cubic inch of space was wasted, yet anyone traveling the country in a trailer as luxurious as Murdock Slankard's headquarters-on-wheels would be denied none of the comforts of gracious living. The whole kitchenette reminded Tommy of pictures he had seen in glossy housekeeping magazines of his mother's.

"Look around," Tug Weldon invited the two boys. "Do you see anything that resembles a high-powered, illegal short-wave radio station?"

Some of the tension left Tommy as his interest was whetted by Weldon's challenge. His eyes raked the cupboard doors, searching for some sign of electrical outlets, antenna feed lines, power supply cables.

"It's well hidden," Tommy admitted finally.

With a wry smile, Weldon reached out to pull a handle which, to all outward appearances, was the door of an electric oven with temperature control and thermometer.

As the door opened, it dropped down to form a steel bench—and displayed, not cooking space, but the panel of a rack-mounted radio transceiver—sending and receiving equipment in the same cabinet.

Tommy came forward, his eyes shining with approval as he looked at the dials and knobs, the meters and toggle switches, the jacks and binding posts and pilot light jewels. This piece of equipment was custom-built by an expert, Tommy saw instantly; it had not been purchased from any factory.

"It—it's beautiful, absolutely beautiful," Tommy whispered. "Did Murdock design it, I wonder?"

Weldon shrugged. "I know nothing about the source of this equipment. I know that you are looking at an illegal radio station which the law has been searching for for over two years."

Tommy remembered something and the light died in his eyes. "You—you said a moment ago to brace myself for a shock?"

Weldon nodded. "I regret to say that I allowed Murdock a little too much freedom. I made the mistake of underestimating the quality of his loyalty to his brother.

"You see," Weldon went on after a pause, "O'Dell and I brought Murdock back to this hideout today because we knew we would be safer in Santa Barbara County than we would LA, where we are undoubtedly the object of an extensive search. That's where Murdock tricked us. He pretended to agree to double-cross his brother—his life in return for the contraband shipment we expect to hijack next week."

Weldon grinned ruefully. "Jigger and I were both congratulating ourselves on an easy victory when Murdock went so far as to guide us to this hideout—which I assure you is very cunningly concealed. We were even more sure of ourselves when Murdock led us to this kitchenette and exposed the secret of his hidden radio transmitter."

Tommy said apprehensively. "Then what did he do to—make you—rub him out?"

Weldon said harshly, "We know now that Murdock wanted to do but one thing before he cashed in his chips. He knew he was a dead pigeon the minute we put our guns on him at the beach Friday night. But Murdock was shrewd. He wanted to make sure we didn't use his radio equipment to make a haul from the Purple Shirt Mob. So he led us here, showed us this radio equipment. And then—"

Pausing dramatically, Tug Weldon reached down and gripped one of the chrome-plated panel handles of the bootleg radio station. The chassis, rolling on ball bearings, trundled out like a drawer, revealing the radio components behind the panel.

"Take a look," Weldon said, stepping aside. "See for yourself

what Murdock did before Jigger or I even had an inkling what he was up to."

Tommy leaned forward to look down at the radio chassis. Spud saw his pal stiffen, with a low cry of grief.

For behind the neat, gleaming panel of Murdock's rig was a shambles of smashed curcuit boards, twisted capacitor plates, dented coils, tangled wire.

"Murdock—did that?" Tommy Rockford whispered.

Weldon nodded. "He lifted a foot and kicked just once, but it was enough. He had accomplished his purpose. He was making sure I would never make radio contact with his brother."

Tommy Rockford tore his eyes away from the sabotaged radio. His tongue felt dry and acid-tasting as he cawed out, "But you—expect me to get it on the air?"

Weldon's eyes narrowed. "You can, can't you, Tommy? I mean, these broken transistors and gadgets can be bought on the open market, can't they?"

Tommy gulped. "You mean—you expect me to repair all this damage—and be on the air by one o'clock Tuesday morning?"

Weldon said, "This is Saturday evening. With a good night's rest, you could spend tomorrow morning assessing the damage and making up a list of parts. I can buy those parts. You'd have all day Monday to work in."

Tommy's face went ashen as he leaned down, studying the situation in more detail. His lips moved soundlessly as he ticked off in his mind the numbers of transistors—2N2907, 2N3055, 2N2222—and the final tube, a 3CX800.

Murdock's sabotage was not irreparable, he saw that now. It merely involved unsoldering connections, removing smashed components and replacing them with parts which, as Weldon had said, were probably obtainable at any radio supply house.

"What it boils down to is this, Tommy," Weldon went on matter of factly. "Your survival depends on your skill at repairing this equipment, let's put it that way. I am confident you can do it. What's your opinion?"

Tommy flicked a reassuring glance at Spud Kleveland, knowing his companion was sorely in need of reassurance.

"I can do it," Tommy Rockford said. "Providing, of course, Murdock has the tools and the testing equipment for the job—"

Weldon gestured to O'Dell. "I anticipated that question. Open the cabinet there, Jigger."

Tommy turned in time to see Jigger O'Dell opening a sliding door beneath the refrigerator. Racks of small metal drawers were displayed there, each neatly labeled: Resistors, Capacitors, Pots, Soldering Lugs, and so on. And visible on open shelves below were various items of test equipment which any electronics technician would have in his laboratory—a volt-ohm meter, a grid-dip oscillator, a compact oscilloscope, power meters and miscellaneous gear.

Catching Tommy's nod of satisfaction, Weldon said to O'Dell, "Take these boys out to their private suite, Jigger. Tommy, try to get some rest tonight. Don't waste your energy trying to escape, because we are confining you in an escape-proof place—what was once a farmer's granary, metal-lined to keep the rats out. Play your cards right and you'll be home for Christmas next Wednesday, as I promised you."

Jigger O'Dell, brandishing a wicked-looking revolver, started down the hall toward the trailer door, motioning Tommy and Spud to follow.

A moment later the boys found themselves outside the trailer—and inside what appeared to be a barn. Lights from the trailer's shuttered windows picked out cobwebbed rafters high overhead, the occasional glint of a star through a crack in a shingled roof.

Parked beside the trailer was a black sedan, the car which O'Dell had used in his kidnaping junket tonight. The trailer itself was a streamlined aluminum job, shaped like a torpedo.

The barn walls prevented Tommy from orienting himself by a glimpse of the mountains. There was a musty smell here, as if the barn had been abandoned for many years; an ideal spot for a gangster to conceal an illicit radio transmitter.

O'Dell, using a pocket flashlight to guide the way, directed the two prisoners across the open barn toward a small, flat-roofed cubicle which Weldon had already identified as the rodent-proof granary. Nearing the open door, Tommy saw the flashlight beam reflected back from the rust-mottled sheet iron which lined the floor, walls and even the ceiling of their prison cell.

As they stepped into the granary in response to Jigger's impatient command, both boys caught sight of the shiny new padlock hanging from the door hasp.

"You got blankets there," O'Dell rasped. "Me, I'd make you sleep on the floor, for all I'd care, but Weldon wants you should be in good shape to patch up that radio stuff."

The fact that O'Dell spoke in an overloud voice and did not make any attempt to shield his flashlight beam told Tommy that this barn must be well isolated from any habitation where curious eyes might spot moving lights in the night.

Just before the gangster slammed the tin-lined door shut on them, Tommy had a glimpse of two or three lap robes lying on the metal floor of the granary. They heard the laminated padlock snap in the massive iron hasp, and then the sound of O'Dell's footsteps heading back toward the trailer.

"We won't suffocate, anyway," Tommy spoke up, his voice sounding eerie, like a radio drama effect from an echo chamber. "If sounds like O'Dell's walking get through, so can air."

In the darkness, Spud's hands found Tommy's. The younger boy was trembling violently, but his whisper showed a manly effort not to reveal his panic: "You—can fix that radio okay, can't you, Tommy?..."

"Sure, sure I can, Spud. Gosh, I'm sorry you got dragged into this—"

Spud's voice had more assurance now: "If I only knew we were going to get out okay, why I'd think this was the biggest adventure a guy could have, Tommy. They're—mobsters, aren't they?"

Fumbling in the darkness, Tommy Rockford sat down on the heap of blankets. He began working on his shoelaces.

"Yes," Tommy admitted, "they're mobsters, but they're no mental match for us, Spud. Weldon wants me to repair that broken radio transmitter, doesn't he? Well, the minute I get it fixed up I'll be sending out a call for help that'll bring the law down on Weldon and O'Dell before they know what the score is."

Spud sat down on the blankets beside Tommy.

"Why," Tommy went on, his overstimulated brain really in high gear now, "I may get help here before I even have a chance to repair that radio. Weldon's going into town for a bunch of parts tomorrow. I'll smuggle a message out in my parts list!"

"But how? What if Weldon read your note?"

"I've already got that figured," Tommy extemporized as he went along. "For instance, when I need a 2N2222 transistor, say, I'll write

down a 'K6ATX transistor'—my radio call, get it? Any radio clerk in town who takes Weldon's order will recognize K6ATX as the ham who is the object of a statewide manhunt, along with the son of Santa Bonita's distinguished newspaper publisher. Do you realize that right this second, Spud, Sheriff Jackson is probably organizing a manhunt to find us?"

After a long pause, Spud whispered hesitantly, "Tommy, I—I don't want to sound corny, but—do you believe in God? I mean, getting prayers answered when you're in a jam, stuff like that?"

Tommy Rockford dropped an arm around Spud's skinny shoulder.

"Spud," he said earnestly, "anyone who ever delved into electronics—the electron theory—anyone who ever studied the miracle of radio itself—would never doubt there's a God."

"But," argued Spud, groping for faith, "when somebody's in a bad jam, like we're in now, would God help him out?"

Tommy thought that over. He had his own sustaining faith, but how could he transmit it to this boy who was leaning so heavily on him for moral support in this terrifying situation?

"Spud, I'm not too good at quoting the Bible," Tommy said. "But doesn't it say something about God knowing when the sparrow falls, and wouldn't you say we are as important to Him as a sparrow? And that adage about God helping them who help themselves—that's exactly what we're going to do, Spud. We'll get ourselves out of this mess, mark my word on it—with God's help."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A shaft of daylight and Jigger O'Dell's prodding toe in the ribs roused Tommy and Spud from their makeshift bed on the granary floor.

"Tug wants you should grab a bite of breakfast and get busy on that radio repair business," O'Dell snapped. "Let's go."

The boys came to their feet, flexing their muscles groggily. Ventilation was poor in the granary and both had dull headaches.

Stepping out of their prison room, Tommy and Spud got their first look at the gangster hideaway. It was, as they had guessed last night, an abandoned barn; the board-and-batten walls prevented them from seeing outside. Bald spots in the shingle roof let in pencils of sunlight which traced golden streaks across clouds of disturbed dust motes and made Murdock Slankard's torpedo-shaped house trailer glitter like liquid silver.

Heading toward the trailer, Tommy's alert eye located the transmitting antenna he had been wondering about. It was nothing more than a bamboo pole with a copper wire wrapped spirally around it—identical to the vertical radiators found on any commercial fishing boat or pleasure craft.

Another detail met Tommy's eye before he and Spud stepped into the trailer—this ancient wooden barn was wired for electricity. This explained the source of power for Murdock's bootleg station.

Tug Weldon had coffee, dry cereal and a bag of oranges waiting for the boys' breakfast. He greeted Tommy brusquely: "I've thought of something. Instead of you trying to repair that radio equipment Murdock smashed, I'll buy a complete new outfit. Any ship chandlery sells radio stuff, doesn't it?"

Tommy's trained mind spotted a flaw in this scheme, much as he would have liked to get out of as lengthy and complicated a repair job as Murdock had set up for him by his sabotage.

"It won't work," Tommy said. "For two reasons. Slankard's radio signals are transmitted on the marine radiotelephone bands, 2738 kilohertz to be exact. But that's a voice band, not code, and Slankard transmits in code."

Weldon nodded, understanding Tommy this far. "Sure—Slankard knows that not one fisherman or pleasure boater in a thousand knows the radio code, or knows how to copy it as fast as Slankard and Murdock send it."

"A radiomarine receiver for the ship-to-ship band would not be equipped with what they call a BFO, a beat-frequency oscillator," Tommy went on. "In other words, any receiver you'd go into a store and buy for the marine bands wouldn't be capable of picking up a continuous wave, or code, signal any more than the auto radio in you car could pick up a television signal."

Weldon nodded, apparently satisfied with Tommy's explanation, although it was not entirely clear to him technically. "You said there were two reasons why I can't replace Murdock's rig with a store-bought one?"

"The other reason," Tommy explained, "is that the power in this barn appears to be 120 volt AC."

Weldon said, "Murdock tapped into the electric power that runs to one of those airplane propeller wind machines they use to protect a citrus grove on frosty nights, just outside the barn."

"Okay," Tommy said. "That's 120 volt alternating current, then. But your marine radio gear is for direct current, as generated aboard a boat or from storage batteries. And a DC set just won't operate on AC—without a complicated rectifying system."

Weldon plugged an electric razor into a wall outlet and occupied himself at shaving during the time it took the boys to finish breakfast. Then the gangster said, "I want you to get right to work on that radio job, Tommy, and so that Spud won't bother you, I'm going to send him back to—"

Tommy cut in sharply, "No—I need him. It'll take both of us working day and night to get that smashed-up rig on the air in time to pick up Slankard's message Tuesday morning. I can't do it alone; I need a helper."

The gangster smiled skeptically. "What help could this wet-nosed wimp give you?"

Tommy lied valiantly, "Spud is a radio ham just like I am. Any job like this—dismantling and then rebuilding—requires two of us. One to watch the schematic diagram and check off each joint as it's soldered, the other to do the actual work."

Weldon glanced toward the far end of the compartment where Jigger O'Dell was engrossed in a paperback Western novel.

"You heard what he said, Jigger. I've got to believe him. Cancel the Spud deal."

O'Dell looked up from his reading. "Okay by me. I got no stomach for takin' a half-grown kid out on a Sunday mornin' an'—"

"Shut up!" thundered Weldon. "You talk too much, Jigger!"

Tommy glanced at Spud. The boy, he saw, did not realize the significance of this explosive interchange between the two gangsters. But Tommy knew. Weldon had planned to have O'Dell get rid of Spud Kleveland, just as he would be getting rid of Tommy when he was no longer of use to them...

It was ten o'clock on this Sunday morning of December 22 when Tommy Rockford rolled up his sleeves and started to work dismantling the damaged portions of the gangster station.

Spud Kleveland, realizing that Weldon would allow him to remain with Tommy only as long as he appeared to be useful, sat at Tommy's elbow copying down the name and number of each part as his companion removed it from the chassis.

The list, two hours later, was a formidable one; it itemized every resistor, capacitor, coil, transistor and choke which Murdock Slankard had been able to damage, and since both a receiver and transmitter section were involved, the number of small parts was considerable for such a small space.

"Let's have a look at that parts list, Spud," Tommy said, reaching for the paper Spud had been poring over. Their eyes met and flashed with secret excitement. Tommy would attempt to smuggle a secret call for help out of this gangster hideaway, with Weldon himself acting as messenger.

It'll work, I know it'll work, Tommy told himself. The minute a "K6ATX transistor" shows up in this list it'll tip off the store clerk who waits on Weldon that this list was made up by the radio ham who's been kidnaped—

From time to time during the morning, Tug Weldon had come up the corridor to watch the progress of Tommy's work. Never for a moment did the gangster relax his guard; he knew that Tommy outmatched him and O'Dell in a physical sense, and that a variable capacitor, in the hands of an athlete like Tommy, could be a dangerous bludgeon at close range.

As Tommy was inserting a fake "K6ATX tank coil, 500 watts, B & W type w/ Faraday shield" in the list of needed parts, Tug Weldon came into the kitchenette to inquire: "How soon will that list be ready? Doesn't look to me like you've got half of that wrecked junk disconnected."

Tommy looked up to meet Weldon's eye. "While you've gone to town after the parts, I'll be removing the junk, piece by piece. Every joint's got to be unsoldered. The fewer I have to remove, the quicker the job will be finished."

Weldon accepted the long list of materials from Tommy, his basilisk eyes shuttling up and down the items as he said, "Can't risk you trying to insert a code message in here..."

Tommy and Spud exchanged glances, their hearts pounding wildly. Finally Weldon glanced up and said, "I've got to recopy this list anyway, so it won't be in you kids' handwriting. Now where can I buy this stuff?"

Tommy said, "There's only one ham store in town and that's Val Shannon's on East Ortega, but it'll be closed on Sunday. So you'll have to go to a retail house, and the only one open Sundays in Santa Bonita is Ed Moran's marine radio shop down by the harbor breakwater."

O'Dell's voice came from the far end of the trailer, "Yeah, Tug, I know the place—next door to Wright's Chandlery."

"Okay," Weldon said. "One more thing—and don't forget, you guys' lives depend on truthful answers. If I take this into Moran's radio store in Santa Bonita, will he want to see a radio license or something?"

Tommy shook his head. "Not for parts. If you had a ham ticket, or a radiotelephone permit to show Ed, he'd give you a wholesale discount."

Weldon grinned, "Seeing as how our cabin cruiser has been seized by the Coast Guard by now, most likely, I guess I'll take the loss and buy this stuff at retail. You kids can break off for lunch now."

While Tommy and Spud were eating their second meal as Purple Shirt Mob prisoners—the menu consisting of fruit and canned goods filched from Murdock's well-stocked cooler and refrigerator—Weldon busied himself recopying, in his own handwriting, the radio parts list.

When he had finished, Tommy went back to work dismantling the broken radio equipment, so as to be all set to install new components when Weldon got back from town.

Weldon, changing into a lightweight gray business suit for his daylight appearance in a town whose police had been alerted to arrest him, made a final visit to the trailer kitchenette.

"I'm sorry I can't trust you, Tommy," the gangster said softly.

Tommy glanced up from his work and knew by the look in Weldon's eyes that he was in grave trouble.

"What do you mean?"

"Trying to double-cross me, Tommy, by inserting your radio call as a transistor number, or coil, or whatever it was. Don't you recall that I saw the K6ATX on your auto license Friday afternoon—that I'd recognize what K6ATX stood for wherever I saw it—even on a parts list?"

At his side, Spud Kleveland seemed to wilt with a little expiring sigh of lost hope.

"I can't blame you for trying, of course," Weldon said in a softer voice. "But here is what you force me to do. I can't be sure whether these other cryptic numbers and names are on the level or not. So, I'm going to drive all the way to Los Angeles to make these purchases. If I don't find any stores open, I'll wait over and do my buying tomorrow."

Without giving Tommy a chance to speak, Weldon wheeled and headed back for the door of the trailer. He barked a final order to Jigger O'Dell, who would be guarding the boys: "Watch them closely, every minute, and—say around eight tonight—take them back to the granary. Take no chances. That Rockford is a sharp one."

Weldon vanished outside and a moment later the boys heard the motor of the black sedan purring.

Tommy's shoulders lifted and fell. "Well, we tried," he said bleakly. "Weldon's smarter than I gave him credit for."

Spud's lower lip was shaking. He whispered, "Do we—have any chance left, Tommy?"

Tommy grinned with a confidence he was far from feeling. "Only

chance now is to use the radio to get out an SOS," he said. "We'll manage, don't worry about that."

Weldon drove out of the barn, O'Dell stepping outside to trundle the barn door shut. It was the first time Tommy and Spud had been left unguarded, and a wild impulse came to Tommy to rush into the living compartment and see if he could locate a gun somewhere before O'Dell returned.

But even as he was rising to his feet to put the thought into action, the aluminum door opened and Jigger O'Dell came inside.

"Time for the news," the gangster said, sliding back a hardwood panel in the trailer wall to expose a compact little AM/FM radio. "Listen sharp, you punks, and you might find out you're famous around Santa Bonita."

Excitement gripped Tommy and Spud. A Santa Bonita radio newscast would link them with a world they had left behind what seemed an eternity ago.

O'Dell thumbed a pushbutton, automatically tuning in a local broadcast station. Tommy felt a tug of nostalgia as he recognized the voice of a personal friend, Ted Shedd, who was a disk jockey and newscaster at station KDB:

"...your pioneer Voice of Santa Bonita, 1490 on your dial. Bringing you the regular 2 PM edition of local news events, courtesy of your friendly Mission Pharmacy at 2830 De la Vina street. Mr. Gaylord Sturvis, proprietor of your friendly Mission Pharmacy, has requested us to omit his usual commercial message today, folks, in order to bring you up to date on the latest developments in the disappearance of two popular high school students—"

Tommy grinned in spite of himself when he heard Ted Shedd descend into the funereal lower-register tones he used for reporting tragic news events. At ham club meetings, where Ted was K6EAQ and chairman of the local Amateur Radio Emergency Service, he was always kidded about his professional "Voice of Doom."

"Sixteen hours have elapsed since the unexplained disappearance of Chester Kleveland, fourteen, and Thomas Rockford, seventeen, from the latter's home at 2910 Mission View Road late Saturday evening.

"Sheriff and police investigators report no evidence of foul play at the Rockford home, but the fact that young Rockford, prominent

local amateur radio operator, left his ham transmitter on the air after stepping out of his radio station to answer the doorbell, is considered ominous. We believe this indicates Tommy was forcibly abducted—no radio amateur of his experience would voluntarily go away and leave a transmitter on, insists Sheriff Jackson. A wide listening audience of amateur radio operators reports hearing young Rockford leave his microphone to answer a knock at the door of his radio room, in company with young Kleveland. Rockford was heard to greet his mysterious visitor; this was followed by the slamming of a door. Since that moment, the fate of the two boys has been a complete mystery."

The newscaster went on to sketch the life histories of the two boys, recounting Tommy Rockford's high school athletic and scholastic record in detail. Rockford's parents, at this moment on the high seas en route from a vacation in Hawaii, had, Shedd indicated, received word by radio of their son's being listed as a "missing person."

Suddenly the KDB announcer interrupted himself to read a flash bulletin which had just been handed him in the studio:

"The body of a hit-and-run victim has been found at the side of Highway 101 near the Tucker's Grove Park road. Rumors that this body was that of Tommy Rockford, the missing high school radio ham, are denied by sheriff's deputies, who state that the dead man was similar to Tommy in size, but appeared to be in his forties—"

O'Dell reached up to snap off the radio.

"Older than that," the gangster commented. "Murdock was crowding fifty if he was a day."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

At ten o'clock Monday morning Tug Weldon got back from Los Angeles with cartons loaded with radio parts. Tommy Rockford and Spud Kleveland were just winding up their second breakfast in the hideaway trailer, under the wary surveillance of Jigger O'Dell.

"I got all the radio stuff you wanted," Weldon said wearily, after sending O'Dell back out to the car to unload. "You've got a little under fifteen hours to get that radio fixed before Grote makes his radio transmission to set up a rendezvous point for his next shipment. Think you can make it?"

Tommy said calmly, "With Spud helping, yes. And provided you keep your trained ape O'Dell out of the way. And that goes for you too, Weldon. I can't keep complicated circuitry in my head if I'm being interrupted every five minutes."

O'Dell came in, staggering under the weight of cardboard cartons bearing the name of a prominent electronics firm in downtown Los Angeles.

"We'll keep out of your hair," Weldon promised. "If we miss this message, we're cooked. Slankard has an arrangement with Murdock—if he fails to keep a radio schedule for any reason at all, they check with each other through some secret telephone arrangement we have no way of knowing. So make the time count, Tommy."

Weldon unfolded the newspaper he had carried into the trailer and held it up for his two prisoners to see. Tommy and Spud saw their own pictures staring at them—snapshots from last year's high school annual—under scare headlines:

FOUL PLAY FEARED FOR SANTA BONITA TEENAGERS MISSING SINCE FRIDAY NIGHT IN HAM RADIO DRAMA

To the boys, it seemed as remote as if it had happened to two other people a long time ago. When Weldon showed no signs of letting them read the press accounts of their disappearance, Tommy said, "Back to the salt mines, Spud. We've got to inventory all this stuff and get to work..."

It took the boys the better part of an hour to unpack and lay out the transistors, resistors, coils and other items which would replace the components damaged by Murdock Slankard. Tommy was plugging in his soldering gun and going over the schematic circuit diagram he had found in Murdock's radio drawer when Tug Weldon woke up from a nap and came down the hall to see how their work was coming along.

"You are a smart boy, Tommy, and I respect your high IQ," Weldon said. "I confess I am ignorant where the technicalities of radio are concerned. But I am not entirely stupid, Tommy."

"I'm too tired to argue," Tommy said cuttingly. "May I remind you that every minute counts?"

"Exactly," Weldon said, and reached for a cardboard box in which Tommy had carefully placed the final amplifier tube. "I took the trouble to ask the radio store clerk who filled my order what part could be removed from a radio transmitter and render it inoperable. He said this 3CX800 tube. So, my dear Tommy, I am impounding this particular item until such time as you are all set to go on the air."

Tommy colored with indignation. "I can't test out this rig, even with a dummy antenna, without that 3CX800 in the circuit—"

"When you need it, you'll get it," Weldon said. "I am taking no chances on you attempting to put a distress signal on the air. I am also keeping the microphone in my possession, and I have had Jigger O'Dell disconnect the antenna outside."

Spud saw Tommy's face go tight and colorless. In the privacy of their granary sleeping quarters, the two boys had gone over Tommy's plans to attempt to put a call for help on the air by completing Murdock's transmitter repairs before they let O'Dell and Weldon know such was the case.

But Weldon, although ignorant of the technical side of radio, was clever enough to hold out key components and thwart any attempt

to get a distress call to the outside world.

Recovering his control with an effort, Tommy bit out, "You figure all the angles, don't you?" and then he turned his back on the dapper gangster and picked up a ceramic capacitor and his soldering gun. "Spud," he said, ignoring Weldon, "your job is to tick off each joint I solder on the schematic. I've got to do in hours a job that would take me days at the high school lab. So let's go!"

"Roger!" Spud said, acting as though reading the symbols on a radio diagram were commonplace with him, although actually it was as mystifying as deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics.

"We'll start with the doubler and work up to the final," Tommy said. "Lucky the VFO was shielded when Murdock went on his bull-in-a-china-shop routine behind the panel."

Thus began, for Tommy Rockford, a nightmare of painstaking work under pressure which increased with each passing hour. For as his time limit neared, his fatigue increased. As a ham he was always happiest when building equipment, experimenting with new circuits and helping other hams build their rigs; he had helped assemble half the Heathkit equipment in Santa Bonita, probably. There was no thrill in radio comparable to building a transmitter and hearing it take off the first time with no key clicks, chirps or parasitic emissions to bother TV viewers.

This fateful Monday afternoon, he should have been working happily at his Christmas vacation job at Val's radio store. Instead he was beginning to realize that there might be no hope of escaping, or being rescued from, this gangster trap.

All the odds were against his getting Murdock's transmitter repaired by his one o'clock deadline tomorrow morning. A badly soldered joint—a missing part he may have failed to order from Los Angeles on his first examination of the sabotaged equipment—even a power failure or bad atmospheric conditions tomorrow morning—any of these unpredictables could keep him from receiving and acknowledging Grote Slankard's illegal transmission.

Spud Kleveland, a kibitzer who knew less than nothing about radio, found himself cast in the role of an assistant. He forgot his own sickening fear in the fascination of watching his friend's skilled hands begin to mount shiny new parts on the chassis, connecting wires, soldering terminals, trimming excess leads with the precision of a surgeon clipping a suture, tracing out complicated circuitry in the

receiver's IF section.

The hours sped. Weldon slept most of the afternoon, resting from his flying trip to Los Angeles; O'Dell remained posted at the entrance of the hallway leading to the kitchenette, reading his Western novel, his gun thrust in the waistband of his jeans, ready for emergency.

After darkness had fallen, Weldon came to the entrance of the kitchenette to see what progress Tommy was making. At the moment, Tommy was checking the resonant frequency of a circuit by means of a grid-dip meter from Murdock's collection of testing instruments.

Weldon, noting how pale Tommy was and how his thumb shook as he adjusted the dial on the grid-dipper, said compassionately, "Knock off for an hour's rest and some chow, kid. You can't drive yourself too hard. How's it coming?"

Tommy set aside the grid-dip meter, after making a notation on a tablet by his elbow.

"I've got the receiver section finished," he said. "We'll be able to hear Slankard's transmission, even if we can't answer back."

Weldon backed off as the weary boys slumped their way into the bathroom compartment to wash up.

"No dice," Weldon called through the aluminum partition. "Slankard will make his transmission, just like you heard it on the tape that afternoon on the boat. But if he doesn't get a signal back from the ground station here, he'll know something's wrong and he won't show up in his plane."

Again they ate from the rations stored in Murdock's food lockers—the choicest canned and frozen meats, vegetables, fruits and juices. Refreshed, Tommy found that his trembling hands became steady again; his bloodshot eyes stopped their burning; the dull, throbbing ache left his head.

Supper over, Weldon turned on the broadcast receiver and they heard another news program from Santa Bonita station KTMS. No new developments on the kidnapping case, but Editor Kleveland of the *News-Star* was quoted as saying he had obtained information which he would be printing—presumably in connection with his son's disappearance—unless Sheriff Ross Jackson voluntarily quit his office by tomorrow noon.

Sheriff Jackson, the announcer said, had "no comment" to make to the newspaperman's mysterious threat.

Weldon reached to snap off the radio when it went into a long-

winded commercial.

"It was a bad break when you picked up this kid friend of Tommy's, Jigger," the gangster said. "He's the son of the Santa Bonita newspaper publisher, and you know darn well what Kleveland is holding over that sheriff."

"I do?" O'Dell echoed.

Weldon gave his confederate a drilling, contemptuous look.

"No, I guess you don't, you punchdrunk nerd. So I'll draw you a picture, Jigger. You snatch Tommy Rockford and Spud. The sheriff knows all about that business of the cocaine shipment Friday night, and you wrecking Tommy's car and his car radio."

"So what?" complained Jigger. "So sure he knows these kids being snatched has something to do with the Purple Shirt Mob. But you notice he ain't put it in the papers yet. He's hopin' Grote will make another air drop—"

"And," cut in Weldon, "as long as the sheriff keeps that out of Kleveland's paper, Grote Slankard won't know anything happened to his brother here in Santa Barbara County. But the editor has got wise, he's picked up the news about that hit-and-run victim on Highway 101 or he's found out about the why and wherefore of that roadblock we slipped through Friday night. He's sure that the sheriff has been suppressing news and he's going to spring that as proof that this Jackson guy isn't shooting square with the public."

"So what?" Jigger O'Dell refused to get agitated. "This newspaper guy won't blow the lid off his scandal, or whatever it is, unless this sheriff chump don't resign by noon tomorrow. And we'll have Grote's message by one in the mornin', if Tommy gets that radio fixed—"

Weldon said in a patient, exasperated voice, "But what if Grote says he's making his contraband shipment, say, on Christmas day, next Wednesday? In the meantime this Santa Bonita newspaper editor spills the beans about Murdock being found dead, and we could wait for Grote's hoods to come up here and investigate and find you and me taking over his brother's hideout?"

Tommy, weary of hearing the two edgy-nerved gangsters arguing, beckoned to Spud and the two boys returned to the kitchenette to resume their work on the radio repair job.

At nine o'clock, Weldon stretched out on his bunk and went to sleep, with orders for O'Dell to wake him when Tommy was ready

for the 3CX800 amplifier tube and his final tests. O'Dell dragged the daybed over where he could keep an eye on the kitchenette by way of the corridor, and stretched out with his cowboy thriller.

Shortly after ten o'clock, Spud jotted a note on the tablet he was using to check off various items as Tommy called them to him, and handed it to his pal:

> O'Dell looks pretty sleepy. If he should drift off, why can't we hit him with a wrench and get his gun?

Tommy nodded, crumpled up the note and thrust it in his pocket. In his own mind, he had given up any hope of saving their lives through physical violence but it wouldn't hurt to let Spud believe they had a chance. Tommy had no hope of Weldon's bodyguard drifting off to sleep.

Tommy muttered, "Too bad this receiver is crystal controlled—rock-bound in the marine radiotelephone bands. I'd like for you to listen to the Monday Midnight Modulators, Spud on ten meters. You haven't lived if you haven't heard the Triple-M gang shoot the breeze."

"What are the Triple M's?"

"The Monday Modulators—it's a social net that meets every Monday night the year round. Those clowns really make you laugh."

"Do you belong?"

"Just as an associate," Tommy said. "Folks won't let me stay up that late, midnight to two o'clock, on school nights. On vacation like tonight, and during the summertime, I never miss a session. Do Baldwin and Roy MacCormack and Mr. Ormsby will be Monday Midnighting tonight."

Spud's eyes suddenly filled with tears. "I—I don't think I could bear hearing those guys' voices," he choked, "and not be able to answer them, Tommy. I couldn't stand it—"

Tommy grinned ruefully. "Don't worry, we can't hear 'em. Not without a ham receiver."

The hours dragged on toward midnight, and Jigger O'Dell showed no sign of relaxing his vigil. One cowboy novel finished, he took another from an apparently inexhaustible supply in Murdock's library.

Spud Kleveland's remark about not being able to talk back to the Monday Midnight Modulators had set a train of thought rolling in Tommy's mind. He knew he would never be able to put an SOS out on Murdock's transmitter—that had been blocked by Weldon's

keeping the microphone and an essential tube, as well as disconnecting the outdoor antenna.

But, ran his thinking, with all this gear couldn't I rig some sort of a makeshift transmitter—something, anything, that would put an RF signal into the ether?

At the moment, he was using Murdock's grid-dip meter to check the alignment of an Intermediate Frequency stage in the receiver he had just repaired.

He was starting to lay aside the little instrument when it came to him—he could use this grid-dip oscillator to put a signal on any wavelength he wished. By breaking that tiny carrier into dots and dashes—

The grid-dipper was the size of a hand-held transceiver, with an ammeter, a tuning dial and a small copper-wound coil form mounted on it. And it was, or could be made to assume the function of, a miniature radio transmitter.

Out loud, for O'Dell's benefit, Tommy said in a casual tone, "Hand me your pencil and pad, will you? I've got some Ohm's Law problems to figure out here—"

Instead, he scribbled on the pad and handed it back to Spud:

> Spud, you know when your neighbor turns on a vacuum cleaner or an electric razor, how you hear it as a buzz on your TV or radio? Well, that means the appliances are a sort of radio transmitter sending out electrical noises over the air, doesn't it?

Spud read the note over twice, his brow knitting, and then he nodded and handed the pad back.

Tommy wrote again:

> See this gadget I've been using to check with? It's called a grid-dipper. Too complicated to explain how it works, but this gadget emits a tiny radio signal on any frequency you tune it to, providing the proper plug-in coil is in place. Anyone within, say, a mile could hear it. Follow me so far?

Spud nodded uncertainly. He was groggy for sleep, but now he was alerted, knowing Tommy had something in mind, something that might have a bearing on their own survival.

He saw Tommy plug the grid-dip meter into an electric outlet

which was fitted with a silent-type mercury switch. Waiting for the grid-dipper's tiny transformer and miniature 6T4 tube to warm up to operating temperature, Tommy jotted a third note:

> Two minutes from now the Monday Midnight Modulator gang go on the air for an hour. I'm tuning this grid-dip meter to their precise frequency. If any of the gang are within range of us they might pick up our SOS. We'll have to trust God on that.

Spud, his fingers trembling so violently he could hardly hold a pencil, wrote back:

> But won't O'Dell hear you sending?

Tommy's note replied:

> I won't be talking out loud, I'll be snapping the switch on and off to send Morse code.

Spud's spirits soared as he saw Tommy carefully adjust the dial on the grid-dipper until the calibrations showed the instrument's signals were radiating on the exact wavelength of the Monday Midnight Modulators gang.

Because the aluminum shell of the house trailer would prevent the tiny signals from getting out, Tommy hung the grid-dip meter outside by way of a ventilation louver in Murdock's food locker.

In the other room, Jigger O'Dell was absorbed in his novel. H had no way of hearing the mercury on-off switch which Tommy begai manipulating at midnight sharp: SOS DE K6ATX, SOS DE K6ATX, over and over and over again.

It was their last resort, their only hope...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The hall clock was chiming eleven forty-five when Doc Baldwin's mother turned off the television for the night. She stood a moment at the picture window, looking out on the lights of downtown Santa Bonita; the neons painted a pink halo on the low ground fog drifting in from the ocean, gilding the rim of Marine Terrace.

Her husband, as usual, was on duty at the hospital. Why did babies always choose to enter the world after office hours? And why did every mother in town seem to want Dr. Baldwin to be her obstetrician?

On the way to her bedroom, Mrs. Baldwin saw that Doc's radio shack door, at the end of the hall, was open. That meant young Doc wasn't hamming tonight—most unusual for a weeknight during winter vacation, when atmospheric conditions were supposed to be so good.

Tears misted the woman's eyes. She knew why Doc wasn't on the air tonight, and why he had scarcely slept a wink since he and Sheriff Jackson had confirmed Tommy and Spud's kidnapping Saturday night.

Mrs. Baldwin could not suppress a shudder of dread. A city policeman and a deputy sheriff, she knew, were in the garage, guarding their home against any possible foul play aimed at her son, who undoubtedly was as susceptible to the anger of the drug smugglers as Tommy Rockford had been. That guard would not be lifted until the abductors had been brought to justice, the police had assured them.

Forcing herself to smile, Mrs. Baldwin stepped into her son's hamshack.

Doc sat at his workbench, tinkering with a single sideband exciter he was building. The volume on his Yaesu FT-757 GX was so low that incoming signals sounded whisper-thin.

"Son," Mrs. Baldwin said, "it's almost midnight. Why don't you stop thinking about Tommy and Spud and go to bed? There isn't much we can do at this hour."

Doc turned to face his mother. His reddened eyes showed how hard the tragedy had struck him. His normally chubby cheeks were gaunt with fatigue lines and his color was pallid.

"Tommy—was supposed to take over net roll call for the Monday Midnight Modulators this week, Mom. So with him. . being gone and everything... I—said I'd take over."

"I understand, darling." Mrs. Baldwin stooped to kiss her husky son. Doc nuzzled his stub nose in her hair and hugged her, and the two of them, for a precious moment, regained the rapport they had known in his elementary school days.

"Good night, Mom. I've got the Yaesu fired up ready to go. But as soon as roll call's finished, I'll turn it over to Mr. Ormsby or somebody. I'm just not equal to cracking jokes tonight."

Mrs. Baldwin left the hamshack and headed upstairs to bed. The hands of Doc's clock were nearing straight-up midnight. Promptly on the hour, as dependable as the time signal from WWV, he would be calling the Triple M gang roll-call.

Doc reached listlessly for the roster sheet. The transmitter was already zeroed in on the net frequency. Two local stations led off the alphabetical list—W6AMD, Roy, was first, and K6ATX, Tommy, was second.

The hall clock chimed twelve midnight. Doc cleared his throat, switched on the antenna to the Yaesu, checked his power by blowing into the mike, and began the preamble transmission to the listening net:

"QST, QST, QST... this is K6CRJ, acting net control station in the absence of K6ATX, for the ancient and mysterious order of the Monday Midnight Modulators, the network for wags, wits, clowns and coo-coos. Late or new check-ins will be called at the end of the regular roster, after which the net will be open to any radio amateur."

He paused, swallowed to loosen the intolerable constriction of his throat. Then he began the roll call:

"W6AMD, Santa Bonita, Control calling and by."

Roy MacCormack usually had a short joke for the sign-in. Tonight

he said perfunctorily, "Control, W6AMD over."

"Thanks, Roy. K6ATX, Santa Bonita, Control calling and by."

Silence. Tommy Rockford's answer was dead air.

Doc's voice broke as he went on, "Tommy is—unavoidably absent tonight, first time he's missed check-in in months. W6HUT—"

"Control from W6 Happy Uncle Tim. Howdy to Doc and the net and we are QRU here."

"Thanks, Reggie. K6 Bravo Foxtrot, Control calling and by."

The receiver remained silent; B. J. Kroger, the grand old man of amateur radio in Santa Bonita, was another absentee.

"W6EUM, Camarillo, Control calling and by."

Doc heard 'EUM come on, but he was clobbered by the interference of either a local station or some high-powered distant station transmitting on exactly the same frequency.

When the QRM subsided, Doc said listlessly, "Double transmission there, but I caught your call, 'EUM, before QRM clobbered you. Go ahead the breaking station, K6CRJ and the Monday Midnight Modulators net are standing by for you."

From the speaker came the voice—not of a visitor wanting to break into the roundtable—but Roy MacCormack's:

"Doc—gang. Listen! Maybe I'm crazy, but when you were waiting for K6BF to check in, I heard something that—my gosh, I know it sounds crazy, but it was an SOS call!"

Anger rose in Doc Baldwin. Roy was the clown of the gang, full of jokes and horseplay, but there were some things that were too sacred to kid about and an SOS was tops on the list—

"I know it sounds crazy," Roy repeated feverishly, "but I heard it, very weak, like a ship a long way off. How about giving a listen, gang, right on our freq?"

Doc said, "Roger-dodger. Will the gang QRX one while we listen for an SOS. K6CRJ."

Doc advanced the audio gain on his Yaesu until the noise level intruded. Tuning carefully across the net's frequency a few kHz in either direction, he heard nothing—and his was one of the most sensitive receivers in the net.

"Any reports, please?" Doc invited the net to break in.

"No copy SOS here, Doc—W6JMW," came the voice of Mr. Ormsby, the radio teacher at the high school.

"Negative copy from W6SKH," reported Ivan Lowelding, the

net member up in the San Joaquin Valley.

"No copy—K6ODE."

Whatever signal it was that had excited Roy MacCormack, Doc decided, he was the only ham in the gang who could hear it.

"Not a whisper of an SOS here," reported K6DXW, here in Santa Bonita. "If this is Roy bragging about that hot receiver of his, getting sigs nobody else can copy—"

Doc switched his Yaesu to transmit. "Net control calling the net to stand by. Joe, I'm sure 'AMD wouldn't joke where an international distress signal is concerned. W6AMD, if you haven't heard anything else, we'll get along with the check-ins. Go ahead."

This time Roy MacCormack's voice held a frenzied urgency: *"I hear it again!* And listen to this gang—it's *Tommy Rockford's call!* I copied it three times straight, and now I've switched on the tape recorder to prove it. It's SOS DE K6ATX, SOS DE K6ATX—"

Doc jumped to his feet so suddenly he upset his chair. He grabbed up the mike: "QRX, everyone on the net. I think you all know that Tommy Rockford, K6ATX, has been unaccountably missing from his home for the past weekend. Now 'AMD is recording an SOS on this freq with 'ATX's sign on it. Roy, I'll give you thirty seconds to rewind your tape, and then maybe you can rebroadcast those SOS calls so the rest of us can copy—Okay?"

W6AMD came back, "I'm rewinding the tape now. It's there I tell you! It's Tommy and he's in trouble somewhere and he's calling us Midnight Modulators for help. Stand by, gang. I'll replay this tape in a sec."

Doc Baldwin reached for his telephone and dialed Sheriff Jackson's home number.

While the phone was ringing at Jackson's, Roy MacCormack came back on, his voice strained but under better control now:

"Here come these SOS signals I put on tape, now. I'd rebroadcast direct from the receiver if it was possible, because the SOS signals are so weak they may be buried under the surface noise of the tape. But here goes—"

The phone spoke in Doc's ear: "Sheriff Jackson speaking."

"Ross? Listen, this is Doc Baldwin. Roy's taped what he thinks is a very weak SOS signal from Tommy on the ten-meter net frequency. He's the only one who can hear it direct so he's rebroadcasting it. Listen sharp—"

Doc held the telephone handset over by the loudspeaker. From it issued the tape recording W6AMD had just taken off the air—receiver noise, static crashes, blending with the noise from Roy's transmitter.

Doc strained his ears until they ached, maneuvering his own receiver's controls to eke the last possible decibel of sound from Roy's transmission. Long practice in fishing rare DX from the QRM of the ham bands came in handy now.

Suddenly, so faintly Doc almost thought his imagination was playing him false, he heard an SOS come out of the noise—the first time in his life he had ever heard a genuine SOS.

There it was: three dots—three dashes—three dots.

The number three had carried a grim connotation among peoples from primeval times. Always, in all cultures, three was associated with danger or distress. Doc's dog-eared Boy Scout Handbook had taught him that three rocks piled on top of each other was a frontiersman's sign for danger. Three smoke puffs was the Indian distress signal. A hunter fired three shots when in need of aid.

And in the International Morse radio code, the symbol SOS had been adopted as the easy-to-send, impossible-to-mistake international distress signal on the high seas. Contrary to a legend popular among laymen, SOS had no other meaning such as "Save Our Ship" or "Save Our Souls."

And now that signal was issuing, in rebroadcast form, from the loudspeakers and headphones of every Midnight Modulator on the network.

SOS, followed by DE, the French for "from," followed by Tommy Rockford's ham call, K6ATX.

They heard the tape cut off, followed by Roy's tense "Did you copy that, gang?"

Doc said hoarsely, "Affirmative, affirmative. Thank God, thank God...Hold on, gang, I've got Sheriff Jackson on the land line. QRX one."

Sheriff Jackson's voice, taut with curbed excitement, squawked from the handset: "I'm on my way to pick you up, Doc. We'll get out to Roy's QTH and see what we can do about tracing that signal down. Tell Roy to check his beam—does he have a beam or a ground-plane vertical?—to get the direction Tommy's signal came from."

As the sheriff hung up, Doc Baldwin stifled a cry of relief. The

sheriff's last words had given him an idea—the means by which ham radio know-how could be used to pinpoint the location of Tommy Rockford's feeble distress call.

Radio direction-finders would do the trick!

One of the main public service activities of the Santa Bonita Amateur Radio Club was its ARES program—the Amateur Radio Emergency Service. Hidden transmitter hunts were a regular weekly training feature of that group, in common with radio clubs all over America. A designated operator would hide himself somewhere in or around the city and the contestants, using direction-finding loop antennas on their mobile auto receivers, would attempt to trace out the hidden transmitter's location first. This electronic searching method was workable because a station's signals were loudest when the loop antenna was pointed toward it, weakest at right angles.

"QST, QST, QST to all Santa Bonita ham stations," Doc Baldwin called. "You all know that Tommy Rockford is missing. You also know that just now, W6AMD, twelve miles north of town, has picked up what appears to be an SOS signal signed with Tommy's call, K6ATX.

"The fact that Roy is the only station who can copy the SOS directly seems to indicate that Tommy is using a low-power rig, or is in a bad location of some kind such as a basement, in the event he is being held prisoner or something.

"So," Doc went on urgently, "the thing for us to do is get a the mobilers we can round up who have direction-finders capable o being used on ten meters, so we can zero in on Tommy's location by means of cross bearings.

"Therefore, will all members of the transmitter-hunting gang please assemble immediately on Highway 101 just outside the Hollister Wye, where Sheriff Jackson will join you shortly to lead you out toward Roy MacCormack's place. This is going to be the most important transmitter hunt in history, gang.

"K6CRJ is now signing clear."

Ducking to a closet, Doc was pulling his mobile ten-meter transceiver and direction-finder antenna off a shelf when he heard voices down the hall. A moment later Ross Jackson and Doc's father, who had just returned from his hospital shift, entered K6CRJ's hamshack.

"I've alerted the ARES transmitter hunters, Ross," Doc said.

"Dad...I've got to—"

"I know, son," Dr. Baldwin said. "Go ahead. God bless you."

When Doc and the sheriff got back to Jackson's high-powered squad car and were loading the portable gear, a Cadillac zoomed up Cliff Drive and screeched to a halt behind the sheriff's vehicle.

Ross Jackson groaned as he recognized Spud Kleveland's father. Chester Kleveland was hatless and coatless. His eyes held a wild, appealing look as he lurched up to Ross Jackson.

"One of Spud's friends called me, said you'd had a radio call from Tommy," Mr. Kleveland said hoarsely.

The sheriff said tautly, "It's possible the message may be from Tommy. On the other hand, it could be a hoax, Mr. Kleveland. Don't build up any false hopes about it, pl—"

"Ross. Listen to me." Kleveland seized the sheriff's coat lapels. "Ross, I know—you have reason to hate me. I beg you, let me go along with you. As a father, not as a newspaperman after a scoop."

Knots of muscle stood out on Jackson's cheeks. He gestured toward the back seat.

"Climb in. We've got to get going."

Five minutes later Jackson's car, siren screaming and red spots flashing, was hurtling along the nearly deserted 101 freeway at better than ninety miles an hour. Doc Baldwin was crouched in the front seat, headphones clamped to his ears, busy tuning his receiver to the Midnight Modulators' frequency.

In a matter of moments, it seemed, the sheriff's car was roaring up to the traffic cloverleaf at the north end of town.

"The gang turned out," Doc panted, seeing the little cavalcade of mobile radio stations waiting there, ham calls on their license plates, direction-finding antennas in place on car fenders and bumpers and cowls. Doc recognized the familiar faces of friends who played the usual transmitter-hunt game every Monday night—Ray Kuble and Freddie Cota and Barney Gallagher and Donn Smith and all the other "old faithfuls" of the ARES gang.

The sheriff picked up a microphone which was connected to twin loudspeakers on the roof. The stentorian tones awoke echoes in the night as Jackson addressed the waiting mobile hams:

"Follow me. Don't exceed the speed limit or attempt to catch up with me—I'll be doing over a hundred until we're past Goleta. Keep tuned to Roy's frequency if you can. We'll begin the transmitter hunt

when we get within range of Tommy's SOS signals. Over."

Blasting horns answered the sheriff as the official car leaped into the open highway. Chester Kleveland, glancing through the rear window, saw the radio ham cars pulling out into a procession behind them.

"Here's a report from Roy," Doc called out, hugging his headphones to his ears. "He says Tommy has given us some more information—he's interspersed his SOS calls with the following, Quote, GDO-BARN, Golf Delta Oscar dash, Bravo Alfa Romeo November."

Leaning over the seat behind them, Spud's father asked frantically, "What does that mean? Does it make sense?"

"Well, the word *barn* would seem to indicate that Tommy is imprisoned in a barn," Jackson called back, "but there are probably a thousand barns in the vicinity. Does the GDO letter group mean anything to you, Doc?"

Doc pulled his eyes away from the speedometer, which was now hovering close to one hundred miles per hour.

"GDO could mean grip-dip oscillator. It isn't a ham call of anyone in our gang, I know that." Suddenly Doc Baldwin got an inspiration. "Ross! I've got it! *Tommy's trying to tell us he's transmitting with a grid-dip oscillator from a barn QTH!* Doesn't that make sense?"

Chet Kleveland drew new hope from the excited reaction Doc's theory brought to the sheriff.

"Doc, I believe you've hit it!" Jackson exclaimed. "That narrows down a hunt for a barn that our ARES gang will be making tonight—because the emissions from a grid-dip oscillator wouldn't carry more than a mile at the most. Which would give us something definite to hunt for—a barn, within a mile radius of Roy MacCormack's QTH!"

The sheriff pulled over to the side of the road. Due to the low volume of Tommy Rockford's SOS signals, Doc would need things as quiet as possible as he rotated his loop antenna for a fix. Behind them, a long string of Santa Bonita radio hams, each with direction-finding equipment in his car, was approaching this location at breakneck speed.

Up to now, transmitter hunts had been just for fun. Tonight the lives of two kidnaped boys might depend on their skill as operators and the quality of their equipment.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Time was fast running out. It was twelve fifty by Tommy's watch—minutes before time to copy Grote Slankard's radio signal.

Tommy completed a final continuity check and laid his insulated probes aside. His voice shook with strain as he said to Tug Weldon, "The job's done, now that we've got that 3CX800 final in. We've got ten minutes to make an on-the-air check."

O'Dell growled suspiciously, "Here's where he could louse us up, Tug. Testin' this outfit. How do we know he won't yell for the cops?"

Tommy and Spud exchanged glances. They had already made their bid for rescue: twenty minutes of transmitting SOS signals with the grid-dip meter, which Tommy had left oscillating a steady signal in case anyone had picked up the messages.

At twelve thirty he had called for O'Dell to wake Weldon and have him turn over the final-amplifier tube he had held out. Everything checked out satisfactory with a dummy antenna.

Now he was ready to attach the actual antenna and put a signal on the air...

The drama of the moment seemed to supercharge the stuffy air of the trailer kitchenette. Spud was at Tommy's side, pale and drawn, but doing a convincing job of posing as a skilled technician.

Jigger O'Dell, with a two-day stubble on his clayblue jaws, looked neanderthalic. Tug Weldon was as dapper and refreshed after his sleep as a tailor's dummy in a store window.

"I've done all I can," Tommy said wearily. "I've got to test the rig out on the air, regardless of what you think."

Tug Weldon, while not as apprehensive as the phlegmatic O'Dell,

was fully aware that Tommy held the trumps in this situation.

"Explain this testing business," Weldon said. "Is it essential? Remember, your life depends on shooting square with us."

Tommy said wearily, "You've got to tune up a transmitter with a load actually on the antenna. For that purpose you use a letter V over and over. Even if Grote Slankard heard us tuning up, he wouldn't think anything unusual was afoot. It's something Murdock himself might have done tonight."

Weldon glanced uncertainly at O'Dell. "The kid's got us in a bind—we don't know the score," the gangster said. "All right, kid, go ahead, put your test signals on the air."

Tommy pointed to a crystal mounted in the receiver section.

"Slankard will be transmitting on a fixed frequency, so we don't have to tune the receiver to it," he explained. "But the transmitter can operate over a wide range of frequencies. So I'll do the testing outside the band Slankard would be monitoring and he won't hear us anyway."

This was all gibberish to Weldon, but he knew that even his untrained ear would detect it if Tommy's key started sending anything but the single letter V. He saw the radio ham remove the dummy antenna—a 500-watt lightbulb—and attach the coaxial cable which led to the vertical antenna outside the trailer.

"Here goes," Tommy said, plugging in the hand key.

He closed the key. Meter needles danced as Tommy expertly tuned the transmitter, adjusting his grid current, dipping the final, his right hand all the while sending the di-di-dit-dah Morse letter V.

"Loads up beautifully," Tommy said proudly. "That Murdock was a real designer."

Tommy switched on the receiver and the speaker came alive with a voice transmission in a foreign language.

"Portuguese fisherman talking ship-to-shore, probably out in Mexican waters on a tuna fleet clipper," Tommy explained. "Now we'll tune the transmitter to the exact frequency—"

As he turned the VFO dial, a whistle sounded in the receiver.

"That means," Tommy explained, "we are now transmitting on Slankard's frequency. All we can do is stand by and see if he comes on at one o'clock."

The clock showed two and a half minutes to go. Would the chief of the Purple Shirt Mob come on with his scheduled radio message

at one o'clock?

"What if we don't hear Grote's signals, Tug?" Jigger O'Dell asked the question Tommy dared not put into words.

The gangster's jaw locked grimly. "If he doesn't, it means he's smelled a rat and won't be getting on the air until he's sure his brother Murdock is okay. If he doesn't come on by five after one, we're scramming out of here, Jigger. You know what would happen to us if Grote Slankard figured we were trying to hijack a shipment on him."

"Yeah," O'Dell whispered, his cheeks pasty white. "We'd burn, but quick. Maybe we're fools for not movin' this trailer somewhere else, Tug. We're sittin' ducks if Slankard sends a rod man up to burn us out—"

Tommy felt a sickish sensation in the pit of his stomach as he turned the receiver gain up. The Portuguese fisherman was off the air now; there was the steady pulse of the beep note indicating that he was listening on another frequency to a land telephone conversation.

The sweep-second hand on the clock seemed to be dragging its feet. Thirty seconds to go. Grote Slankard, in his two-motored plane somewhere off the California coast, or maybe hiding out in some lost canyon in Old Mexico with his high-power radio station...Grote Slankard, most-wanted criminal on the FBI roster north of the border, was probably watching the second hand of a synchronized clock right this moment, too.

Twenty seconds to go...

Spud Kleveland's eyes were shut and his lips were moving in prayer. Tommy's gaze shuttled over to Tug Weldon. The man's face was slick in the glare of lights, jutting eyes fixed on the grill of the loudspeaker. The only sound in this moment of breath-held suspense was the soft hum of the power-supply transformers and atmospheric noises from the speaker.

"One o'clock sharp," came O'Dell's icy whisper.

Five seconds past one. Ten. Fifteen.

No sound of a rapid-fire code signal. Tommy's fingers clenched until his nails cut through his palms. He was thinking, if Slankard has caught on somehow that Murdock is dead—if he doesn't get on the air inside the next five minutes, Weldon and Jigger will get panicky and run for it. And there isn't a chance they'd leave Spud and me alive.

Jigger O'Dell broke the intolerable silence: "He knows. The chief's wise to us knockin' off his brother. He's—"

"Listen!" Tommy Rockford cut in. "There's a carrier. With mobile flutter on it, aeronautical QSB. Slankard's transmitting from a plane. It's got to be him, it's got to be..."

Clear and crisp, a solid 5-7-9 signal issued from the speaker on the wall: "QRV? K."

"What's he say?" whispered Weldon in a choked tone.

"QRV—he's asking, 'Are you ready?' What'll I answer?"

Weldon bit his lips in an agony of indecision.

"Answer—whatever any operator would answer."

Tommy threw the switch to transmit. Here was the acid test. If Slankard had sent that QRV signal, would he recognize the answer came from some other fist than his brother's? Or was he waiting for some kind of coded symbol which no one but Murdock Slankard would know?

Tommy tapped out an "R" for received, followed by a "K" to signify go ahead.

Back on receive, the speaker was mute for a few seconds. Then it came on with a rapid burst of Morse code. Tommy's brain raced to keep up with that high-speed CW:

12-24-Moonrise...

And then followed the all-important map coordinates which would tell where Slankard would be making his contraband drop.

So rapidly was the boss of the Purple Shirt Mob transmitting that Tommy could not be sure until the third repeat came around tha the rendezvous spot, representing a point on the auto club's map of Santa Barbara County, was J and 3.

But now that he had that information, Tommy had no intention of passing it along to the kidnapers. He had long before made up his mind to give the correct date and time—but an entirely different rendezvous point. At random, he now chose the symbols H and 9.

"Well—what was it?" Tug Weldon asked sharply, when the third and final transmission ended and Tommy had acknowledged it with a single "R" meaning "received okay."

Tommy picked up a pencil and scribbled on the formica top of the work bench: "12-24-Moonrise-H-9."

"Twelve twenty-four—that's December twenty-fourth—why, that's *today!"* O'Dell cried. "Slankard's makin' the drop today. What time's moonrise?"

The two gangsters almost knocked heads in their anxiety to con-

sult the almanac-type calendar on the wall. "Moonrise is at 2:17 AM," Weldon said shakily. "An hour and a quarter from now. Where's H and 9 put us?"

Tommy and Spud exchanged taut glances as Weldon ran his forefinger along the H latitude grid of the county map, stopping when he came to the intersection of the ninth longitude line.

"Inland," he announced. "Nearest landmark seems to be the fire lookout station on Santa Ynez Peak."

Raw suspicion kindled in O'Dell's eyes as he turned to face Tommy. "He gave us the wrong info, Tug. Slankard wouldn't drop a half a million dollars worth o' counterfeit dough right on top of a Forest Service layout. Rockford's tryin' to trap us—"

Despair hit Tommy. His arbitrary choice of "H-9" had hit Santa Ynez Peak quite by coincidence. Guilt must be showing all over him. But out of nowhere he came up with an inspiration: "Guess again, Jigger. This is wintertime. The fire lookouts close in October, when the rains start. Santa Ynez lookout is the loneliest spot in the whole county."

Weldon squinted at the map. "Seems to be a road leadin' to Santa Ynez Peak. Is it open this time of year?"

Tommy welcomed a chance to get a close look at the county map again. He wanted to know where Grote Slankard's plane actually would make the contraband parachute drop at moon-up.

"That road's El Camino Cielo—the Skyline Drive," Tommy said. "It's open the year round. I can show you the quickest way to get there—where are we located now? Where's this barn on the map?"

Waiting for Weldon's answer, Tommy's eye raced over to the longitude 3 line, followed it over to the latitude J grid. The two met at the jutting promontory of Point Concepcion, where the California coastline turned the corner northward.

His blood raced with excitement. Little more than an hour from now, Slankard's plane would be zeroing in on Point Concepcion—while his confederate would be waiting for him at lonely Santa Ynez peak, forty miles away!

"None of your business where this barn is," Weldon growled. "Suppose I'm on Highway 101. How do I get to this look-out by car?"

Tommy pointed to a blue line on the map.

"There's Highway 101, skirting the coast northward out of Santa Bonita. Paralleling it, on top of the mountain range, is Skyline Drive.

On the east end of the Drive is San Marcos Pass. On the west end is Refugio Pass. They're both paved roads. The Skyline Drive leading to the fire lookout is a graded dirt road. So whether you take San Marcos or Refugio depends on which Pass is the nearest to this spot. That's all the help I can give you."

Weldon and O'Dell went into a quick huddle.

"I figger it's an hour's drive or less, if I don't run into bad roads," Weldon panted. "And I imagine Slankard scouted the roads from the air before he chose the spot."

Weldon shoved Tommy Rockford aside, brushed past O'Dell and headed for the corridor. His flushed face was twisted with excitement as he unlocked a wall cabinet and took out a .45 pistol and a wicked-looking Uze machine pistol.

"Jigger," Weldon said, flicking a glance at his confederate, "you know these two kids are the only witnesses who could cause us any trouble. Take care of 'em."

Outrage, rather than panic, welled up in Tommy Rockford.

"You double-crossing rat!" he shouted. "I lived up to my side of the bargain—getting that rig repaired in time—taking down your messages—"

O'Dell jerked out an automatic and poked Tommy in the ribs with the muzzle.

"Shut up, you. Win, lose, draw—you two brats are getting paid off."

Weldon was feverishly checking the extra clips of ammunition he was stuffing into the pockets of his sports coat. O'Dell demanded surlily, "Ain't I goin' with you? A couple of shots—there ain't a house inside of a mile—"

"You idiot!" snarled Weldon. "We've got to make sure their bodies aren't found for a few days. I'll pick you up on the way back from Santa Ynez Peak, before five at the latest. That gives you time to bury these kids. That way, when the heat's on, we'll be safe in Mexico."

Tug Weldon was gone then, not even bothering to close the trailer door behind him. O'Dell blocked the only exit from this kitchenette, the mouth of the narrow hallway, the bore of his automatic weaving from Spud to Tommy as if he was trying to make up his mind which to make the first target.

Outside they heard the grind of a starter, the motor of the gangster

car roaring alive, the clash of gears as Tug Weldon sent his car out the barn door.

Tommy flicked a quick glance at Spud, intending to say something, some last word of encouragement for the boy who had been dragged into this endless nightmare with him. But he saw that Spud did not need that encouraging word from him. There was a look on the boy's face that instead brought Tommy's own flagging courage back on an even keel again—a look that told Tommy his companion in danger had found himself here at the climax of their terrible adventure.

Spud's hands were behind him; in one hand he had a plastic-handled screwdriver. The glint of light on the metal shaft of that screwdriver drew Tommy's eye to what Spud was doing, his movements masked from Jigger O'Dell's view.

Spud's free hand was feeling along the edge of the workbench for the electric outlet. He was pulling out the plug and cord of Tommy's soldering gun, edging the screwdriver up toward that half-exposed contact prongs of the soldering gun plug.

In that instant Spud's sideways glance caught Tommy's eye, and the message flashed between them: Spud was going to short out the trailer's electric light system.

Tommy swung his eyes toward Jigger O'Dell.

The gangster's pistol was lined on Tommy Rockford now; his eyes were glittering sadistically.

"You punks got about half a minute left," sneered the mobster, "but I'm tellin' you something'. That Weldon dude will be joinin' you soon enough. I ain't splittin' no swag with that uppity Weldon. I'm smoking him down, same as I am you punks—"

"Now Spud!" Tommy hissed.

Spud thrust his screwdriver blade against the exposed prongs. There was a flash of sparks, a sputter of electricity, a stench of ozone; and utter blackness plunged down as the kitchenette lighting circuit was shorted out.

O'Dell's gun spat its nozzle of orange-blue flame, but the slug bored through empty space where Tommy Rockford had been standing an instant before.

That bore flash illuminated a pinched-off, fast-action picture for Spud Kleveland: Tommy's flying tackle, his head and shoulder smashing Jigger O'Dell in the stomach with all the might of a two-

hundred-pound football player's pile-driver strength.

The impact of Tommy's hurtling shoulders bowled O'Dell backwards in the cramped confines of the narrow hallway. As Tommy came up, straddling the gangster, he got both hands on O'Dell's gun arm just as O'Dell triggered the automatic again.

And that deafening gun blast kept Tommy from hearing the sudden chatter of Tug Weldon's machine pistol somewhere outside the barn, and the beginnings of a police siren's banshee wail out of the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tommy felt the searing air-whip of the .45 slug an inch from his temple, the bullet ripping a slot through the aluminum curve of the hall ceiling. O'Dell did not get a chance to jerk trigger a third time. Even as the hot, smoking shell was ejected from the weapon, Tommy Rockford's right fist rose and fell in a sledging blow which caught Jigger O'Dell on the point of the jaw.

Tommy did not hear the sodden, meaty *thwack* of knuckles denting bone; the gun concussion had temporarily deafened him. Desperation had been behind that punch, and the sinew-tough power that three months' football training had instilled in his tremendous shoulder and back muscles. He felt the numb, tingling shock of the blow run up his arm, his elbow, his shoulder; and he knew by the sudden wilting of the man's torso under him that O'Dell was out like the lights Spud Kleveland had short-circuited.

The fluorescent fixtures in the front end of the trailer were on a different circuit from the kitchenette. By that glare of light coming up the corridor toward them, Tommy Rockford regained his feet and, turning, leaped to pick up a coil of copper wire he had used in rewiring Murdock Slankard's illicit transmitter.

He did not hear his own glad shout: "You saved us Spud, you saved us! We'll tie up that gorilla O'Dell and then scram out of here before Weldon comes back—"

Spud's knees felt wobbly. He stared down at the fused, blackened screwdriver in his hand; it occurred to him that this tool would be the most precious souvenir he would ever own.

By his quick thinking, Spud had given Tommy the chance to use the brawn Spud lacked. Without the precious element of surprise Spud

had provided, Tommy could never have dived in and under the gun in O'Dell's fist.

"We've got to get out of here!" Tommy yelled. "Weldon might have heard the shooting—"

Spud saw Tommy roll the unconscious gangster over on his back and truss his wrists and knees with turns of 12-gauge copper wire.

Then Tommy picked up the automatic O'Dell had dropped and, grabbing Spud by the hand, went racing for the front of the trailer.

Not until they bolted out the open door of the house trailer did they hear the wail of police sirens, seemingly dozens of sirens; and they knew then that Weldon would not be back after them.

Still shaking, Spud and Tommy raced out the barn door in full moonlight, seeing their surroundings for the first time: the ordered rows of lemon trees stretching off into the night, a steel tower nearer at hand with a motor and airplane propeller on it to keep lemon groves from being damaged by frost on winter nights.

And then, above the dying wail of sirens, Sheriff Jackson's voice bellowed from somewhere in the trees:

"Tommy, Spud, duck for cover—we've got Weldon cornered—there's going to be lead flying around here if he chooses to fight it out—"

The two boys dove headlong for the nearest cover—a concre platform under the wind-machine tower—just as a burst of gun sho shattered the night. Tommy and Spud permitted themselves a quic peek around a corner of the concrete coaming.

They saw three black sedans, each carrying the big gold shield insignia of the County Sheriff's office, converging their spotlight beams on a black Buick which was bogged axle-deep in the soft adobe clearing outside the barn.

Impaled on those converging needles of dazzling light was Tug Weldon, still carrying his machine pistol, as the gangster opened the door of the stalled sedan and stepped out.

Jackson's voice, amplified a hundred fold by a battery-powered electric bullhorn, challenged Weldon like Jovian thunder:

"The place is completely surrounded with my motorized posse and volunteer radio hams, Weldon. Drop the gun or we're going to let you have it."

For a moment, Tommy Rockford thought Weldon was going to choose suicide to surrender. Then Weldon dropped to his knees in

the soft dirt beside his getaway car, and flung the machine pistol to one side before raising his arms.

It was all over.

Pandemonium broke loose on the heels of Tommy's shout to the sheriff: "It's okay—Weldon's bodyguard's inside there, tied up like a spring chicken, Ross—"

Men erupted from everywhere, armed with pistols and shotguns—Deputies Britton and Webster and Olson and Ontiveros, and back of them came the radio hams whose direction-finders had zeroed in on this barn, the source of Tommy's feeble SOS signals.

Spud let out a yell and a whoop as he saw his father stepping out of the sheriff's car, white-faced and disheveled. Tommy saw Doc Baldwin and Roy MacCormack boring in through the milling crowd of officers and ARES operators.

"Looks like a hamfest or something!" howled Tommy Rockford, going into a war dance with Doc and Roy.

Ross Jackson hurled his arms around Tommy with unabashed fervor. Then he leaned back, his haggard face searching Tommy's, as if to make sure this was really happening.

"You and Spud—are okay?" Jackson's lips moved behind the din.

"Fine and fit, Ross." Tommy moved in closer, his lips against the sheriff's ear: "Capturing Weldon and O'Dell isn't the big feather in your cap tonight, Ross. You can nab Grote Slankard in the act of making a contraband drop—"

The crowd, seeming to sense that Tommy was telling the sheriff something of tremendous importance, went suddenly still. Tommy saw two husky deputies marching O'Dell out of the barn into the moonlight, the gangster barely able to walk. Another pair of deputies had led up Tug Weldon, now handcuffed and facing the death penalty in San Quentin's gas chamber along with his henchman.

"When you caught Weldon driving away from here," Tommy spoke into the silence, "he was heading out to keep a rendezvous with Grote Slankard at two-seventeen this morning—moonrise. Weldon thought Slankard's plane would show up at Santa Ynez Peak, but that was a bum steer I gave him—"

Tommy saw Weldon's head lift, his eyes widening as he stared, slack-jawed, at his erstwhile prisoner.

"You—double-crossed me?" Weldon choked incredulously.

Tommy grinned. "Only by about forty miles, Weldon." He turned back to Sheriff Jackson. "Slankard's plane will arrive at Point Concepcion at two seventeen or thereabouts. There's still enough time to have a plane intercept him, Ross—and smash the Purple Shirt Mob for keeps."

Chester Kleveland, his arm around his son, came up to stand beside the sheriff in time to hear Jackson's chief radio technician, Hugh Britton, say to Tommy: "Slankard won't make the drop when he gets there. The Point is socked in solid with fog. I caught the weather report just before we hit the road tonight."

A slow grin bent Tommy Rockford's lips. "Are you forgetting, Hugh, that the sheriff has radar equipment on his patrol plane? He knows that often Slankard has done his smuggling work under cover of fog—because Slankard's speedboats and airplanes are radar equipped for blind navigating."

Britton grinned.

"I was just feeding you the straight lines," he drawled, "so you could explain for Mr. Kleveland's benefit, Tommy, that sometimes the law has to use scientific methods of fighting scientific criminals."

Chester Kleveland raised his hands in mock surrender.

"I think you'll find," the publisher said candidly, "that the editorial policy of the *News-Star* has undergone considerable change since all this happened. Because," Kleveland said huskily, "I fully realize that we owe Spud's and Tommy's lives to the teamwork of radio hams—"

In the ensuing din of applause, Tommy said to Ross Jackson, "It looks like you won't have to worry about a bad press any more, Ross. And right now, I'd like to find out how the old ham gang brought all this about—"

Doc Baldwin, Roy MacCormack and the dozen-odd ARES radio amateurs, whose mobile direction-finding gear had been responsible for pinpointing Murdock's hideout, proceeded to hustle Tommy and Spud away from the confusion.

"How'd we get here in time to nab that goon Weldon?" grinned Ward Scott. "How do you suppose, you dipstick? Didn't you put an SOS on the air at midnight, using a grid-dipper?"

Tommy said incredulously, "So it worked...talk about God answering prayer!...I didn't think those signals had a chance."

"Well," Roy MacCormack conceded, "they were barely Q-5 at

my QTH, which was the only station in range."

"By the way," Tommy asked, "just where is this barn, anyway?"

"Twelve miles out of town," Roy answered. "On the ranch just west of ours. Our neighbors, Abe and Alva Wilson, rented this old barn to an artist to park his house trailer in while he holed up to turn out paintings."

Tommy said wryly, "The 'artist' happened to be Murdock Slankard, number two man on the Purple Shirt Mob. Come on, guys—I want you to see his bootleg radio station. I hope the sheriff confiscates that gear and lets the ham club advertise it for sale in *Key-Klix.*"

Ross Jackson buttonholed Tommy long enough to double-check the details of Grote Slankard's rendezvous at Point Concepcion, after which the sheriff radioed his radar-equipped plane, warmed up and waiting at the airport, to take off in time to intercept the smuggler pilot.

Spud and his father joined the chattering group of radio hams around Murdock's illicit radio station. Spud had come into his own: he would be, when school reconvened after New Year's, the top-ranking celebrity of the freshman class at SBHS.

The following morning Tommy Rockford drove his parents' car down to the Esbee Helipad to await the arrival of the LA commuter hop which was bringing them home.

A grinning newsboy, recognizing Santa Bonita's hero of the hour, thrust a Los Angeles extra through the car window. It bore Tommy's and Spud's photographs on page one under a banner headline:

TEENAGE RADIO HAMS BREAK UP PURPLE SHIRT GANG

The press service account of the end of the Purple Shirt Mob was similar to the story a chastened Chester Kleveland had published in the Santa Bonita *News-Star;* it even quoted Kleveland's glowing tribute to Sheriff Ross Jackson, "a man who fights crime waves with radio waves."

On page two was a photograph of the tangled wreckage of a two-engine seaplane which had crashed on the rocky heights above Point Concepcion at moonrise yesterday. It was captioned:

> Wreckage marking suicidal end of Grote Slankard, No. 1 on the FBI's list of wanted criminals. Slankard, making a parachute drop of over half a million dollars worth

of counterfeit currency which was later impounded by the Coast Guard, was intercepted at moonrise yesterday by Sheriff Ross Jackson's radar-equipped county patrol plane piloted by Capt. Tom Allin. Slankard chose death to arrest, nosediving his plane into the cliffs without making any attempt to parachute to safety. Slankard's remains were cremated in the wreckage—

There were other pictures in the Los Angeles paper—the kidnapers' barn, the illicit radio station, the cruiser *Skipalong,* Sheriff Jackson—and Tug Weldon, the latter behind jail bars.

It didn't make pleasant reading for a sunny Christmas morning. Tommy turned instead to the gift which Spud's father had brought over from Val's store yesterday evening—a shiny new two-meter Ten-Tec like the one of Doc's which Tommy had so long envied.

The Christmas tag was still attached to the handle by a sprig of holly and a loop of red ribbon:

> Merry Christmas to K6ATX, with deepest gratitude. Early in the new year all three of us—Mom, Dad and Spud—hope to have our Novice licenses so we can join you on the air and share the fun.The Kleveland family

Tommy had yet to try the rig out as a mobile. He turned the switch on, at that moment hearing the distant whir of a helicopter. His folks' chopper was just barely in sight; he was moments away from the most ecstatic reunion his family had ever known.

Suddenly the familiar voice of Doc Baldwin issued from the speaker: "...two meters, CQ two meters, CQ two meters. Seek You and Ye shall Find. Is anybody around this Yule morn? This is K6CRJ, Santa Bonita, begging and puh-leading for a Christmas morning contact. Go ahead, I'm listenin'—"

Out of sheer pity—knowing he had no time for a go-round—Tommy pushed the transmit button and called, "K6CRJ, this is K6ATX. You're dumping a solid five by nine-plus signal here at the Esbee Heliport, Doc. Sorry, I'm pulling the big switch on you, because my dad and mom are just arriving and I can't get tied up with an inflated, loquacious windbag like you. Merry Christmas, pal, and seventy-three. K6ATX clear."

Author's Note

SOS at Midnight is an adventure story involving radio "hams." While the average ham would not run into the kind of danger and excitement that Tommy Rockford did, ham radio can be counted upon to provide never-ending thrills to its practitioners.

What is a radio ham? He or she is the neighbor next door, your newsboy down the street, your grocer, perhaps your family doctor or your favorite movie star: In short, anyone who owns and operates his own personal short-wave radio station at home. (Many advanced amateurs even have home television transmitters but they are not numerous enough to be commonplace as yet. Give 'em time!)

There are more than 400,000 of these short-wave amateur radio stations in the United States. Another 560,000 hams are scattered throughout every portion of the globe, civilized or uncivilized—behind the Iron Curtain, on frozen Arctic wastes, on Pacific atolls, in the heart of Africa's steaming jungles.

Ham radio started near the turn of the century. America owes her leadership in the fields of radar, TV and radio to the ceaseless experimenting which goes on in "hamshacks" throughout the land. Most hams, though, are not professionals. They are schoolchildren, business men and women, or retirees. The hobby is a Godsend for persons with disabilities, providing them with a magic carpet to the far corners of the world.

Somewhere in the United States, every hour of every day the year round, a new ham gets on the air for the first time. That's how fast the hobby has mushroomed since 1951, when the Federal Communications Commission first issued the "Novice Class" license. The most truly democratic of all hobbies, ham radio has infiltrated into tenement flats in Brooklyn, cowboy bunkhouses in Wyoming, millionaires' penthouses in Hollywood—and the house next door or down the street. At the rate of more than a thousand per month, your neighbors are discovering that ham radio is inexpensive and safe, takes very little room in the house, and provides a gigantic "party telephone line" with the whole wide world as close as your speaker.

What is this Novice Class license, and why did Uncle Sam start urging his nephews and nieces to take advantage of it?

The Novice Class examination is a simple one which you may take in your own home—a few questions requiring a beginner's knowledge of basic radio theory and FCC regulations, plus the ability to send and receive International Morse code at the rate of twenty-five letters (or five words) per minute. Upon passing this test the applicant is assigned a station callsign by the FCC, just like the broadcasting or TV station in his home town. As a Novice you can transmit on the air for ten years. In a short time, however, you can usually pick up enough additional skill and knowledge to pass your General Class license, which gives you additional frequencies and privileges permitting you to speak instead of being limited to Morse Code. It is renewable for as long as you wish.

There is a very definite and practical reason why our government wants Dad, Mother, Brother and Sister to take up ham radio, of course. This is a pushbutton age. America's survival in a scientific era may well depend on its technicians. There is no easier way to embark on a career in electronics and allied fields than Amateur Radio. If you want to get the latest information about getting into ham radio, send a postcard to the American Radio Relay League, Newington, Connecticut 06111, requesting their free packet of beginner information.

Ham radio is a friendly, neighborly, happy way to make new friends the world over. Why don't you join us? Vy 73,

Walker A. Tompkins

... —.—

SOS AT
MIDNIGHT
PROOF OF
PURCHASE

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Tommy Rockford, K6ATX is back on the trail of high adventure! ARRL is proud to bring back updated versions of Walker Tompkins' exciting classics plus a **brand-new** thriller: ***Death Valley QTH.*** Newcomers and oldtimers alike will find it impossible to put these books down. They are written in a style that will spark an interest in Amateur Radio among unlicensed persons as well.

SOS at Midnight finds Tommy up against the Purple Shirt Mob and ham radio saves the day! The beachcomber seemed like a harmless character, but what did he have to hide in ***CQ Ghost Ship***? Underwater adventure and ham radio join together to form the exciting conclusion to ***DX Brings Danger.*** In ***Death Valley QTH,*** what starts out to be a typical Field Day operation becomes a matter of life and death for K6ATX and the members of the Santa Bonita Amateur Radio Club.

The author, who is K6ATX in real life, is an accomplished television screenwriter, newspaper columnist, historian and biographer. His intimate knowledge of the areas where these stories take place makes them even more true-to-life. You'll want to read all four of these classics in Amateur Radio fiction!

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